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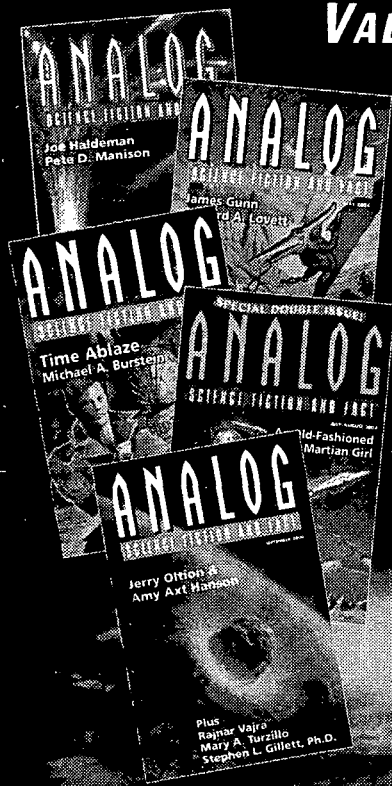
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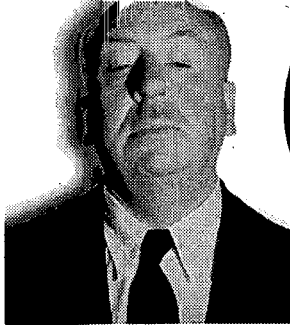
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June 2005

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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

CRIME NOTES

John F. Dobbyn is known to AHMM readers for his Boston-based stories featuring jockey-turned-P.I. Billy O'Casey. His story this month, "Monday, Sweet Monday," features Michael Knight, a character from the O'Casey series. In his solo outing Knight, a young defense attorney with a passion for jazz, takes on what looks like a hopeless case. Mr. Dobbyn teaches law at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, and has written a novel featuring Knight and his senior partner Lex Devlin.

Martin Limón has earned critical acclaim for his series of stories featuring George Sueño and Ernie Bascom of the U.S. Army C.I.D. in Seoul, South Korea, in the 1970's; the C.I.D. agents made their debut in these pages in 1991 with "The Black Market Detail." This fall Soho Press will publish his fourth novel in the series, *The Door to Bitterness*, and reissue in trade paperback *Slicky Boys* and *Buddha's Money*. In this issue, "Death of an Aztec Princess" marks the first AHMM appearance of Gonzo Gonzales, a former cop who is now a P.I. in East L.A., who must penetrate a rough Chicano gang to find out why his young cousin Juanita was murdered.

We also welcome three authors new to AHMM this month. Tom Savage draws on his experience in the theater with "The Method in Her Madness." Mr. Savage tells us, "I was an actor, started writing plays and screenplays, evolved to mystery/suspense novels because that is what I've always read." He has published four thrillers and his 1996 novel *Valentine*, published by Little, Brown, was turned into a film of same name; as T. J. Phillips, he is the author of the Joe Wilder mystery series.

Kevin Prufer, author of "The Body in the Spring," has published three books of poetry; his poems have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, *New England Review*, and elsewhere, and his latest poetry collection, *Fallen from a Chariot*, will be published this year by Carnegie Mellon University Press. He is also the editor of the literary journal *Pleides*, a professor at Missouri State University, and a collector of ancient Roman coins.

Hailing from Oklahoma, Joyce Gibb makes her fiction debut with "Who's Going to Hang?" Currently working as a a psychotherapist, Ms. Gibb has been a junior high school English teacher, a technical editor, a real estate broker, and a proprietor of an herbal apothecary. She tells us her passion is Medieval English history and she is working on more Nicholaa de la Haye stories.

New writers, new characters, familiar pleasures. Enjoy!

MONDAY, SWEET MONDAY

JOHN F. DOBBYN

There are, as they say, only three certainties in life: death, taxes, and a motion session on Monday in the Suffolk County criminal court of Judge Herbert "The Hammer" Sadoski. The first two are unpleasant. The third is hell in CinemaScope.

Being engaged in criminal defense work, and the junior partner of the reigning bear of that particular cave, Alexis Devlin, I awoke on Monday to the prospect of standing before "The Hammer" with at least half a dozen motions to suppress evidence illegally obtained from the apprehended worthies who decorate our client list.

His Honor cut his legal teeth after law school as a prosecutor and never outlived the mindset. He seemed to take unholy delight in lining up my motions like clay turkeys in a shooting gallery and drilling silver bullets through their little hearts.

You might wonder if this is debilitating to the ego. It is. And yet, I can still say "Sweet Monday," because come tornado, flood, or raging lunatic on the bench, at ten P.M. on any Monday night, I wind down the circular row of steps at 87 Beacon Street like a kid entering Disneyland.

Daddy's Club is a long, dark, subterranean room with a bar against the long left wall, six tables down the center, and a bandstand to the right of the door large enough to accommodate five tight-packed musicians and not one mouse more.

On most nights, but always on Mondays, a third of the stand is consumed by the gargantuan bulk of Charles "Daddy" Hightower himself. The other musicians rotate depending on who's in Boston at the moment.

It should be known that Daddy, as everyone calls him, came up through the ranks of jazz musicians of the stature of Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Mingus, and other pathfinders of the fifties New York scene. He was the bass player of choice for everything from recording sessions to sit-ins among the royalty of New York



jazz, until he ran afoul of the boys in a certain Sicilian organization who wanted exclusive ownership of his talents. Daddy was not for sale. They broke most of the bones that can be used to wring magic out of a stand-up bass, and Daddy became a hospital orderly.

Around 1990, one of the musicians he had played with did a stretch as a patient in the Massachusetts General Hospital and recognized him. One thing led to another, and a group of musicians bankrolled the start of Daddy's Club on Beacon Street. From that day on, no competent jazz musician passed through Boston without stopping at Daddy's Club for a sit-in.

On this particular Monday night, I came down those steps with the spent energy of a seventy year old. As always, I found a seat at the bar and cuddled up to the three inches of Famous Grouse scotch that Manny the bartender slipped in front of me. A sweet blanket of Johnny Mercer's "Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home," driven mostly by Daddy on bass, folded over me, and by the end of the second improvised chorus, I was twenty-seven again.

The set ended, and I just floated in the aura of the sounds I had just heard. Daddy was surrounded by musicians giving assorted handshakes and asking about the old days.

I was pulled out of near slumberland by a great beefy hand on my shoulder and Daddy's perspiring ebony face at my left ear.

"What you think of that?"

I turned to that big grinning face.

"You did it again, Daddy. You drove the old man right out of here."

"What old man is that?"

"Doesn't matter. He's gone now. Just us chickens here."

"Then why don't 'us chickens' do what God put us here for?"

It was a physical effort to unwind my fingers from the Grouse, but I followed Daddy to the stand. I slid onto the piano bench as I had every Monday night for the past four years. The keys found my fingers, and I waited for Daddy's cue.

In the dark, I saw the tall, lean figure of an African American, closer to my age than Daddy's, work his way through the tables to the stand. I caught the gleam of one of the few rays of light in the place on a saxophone as he got close.

He whispered a bit to Daddy, and I heard a few names I recognized. Daddy leaned over the piano to me.

"Michael, this here's Keno Westoba. Says he's in from Philly. Worked with a couple of the Heath boys down there. That's good by me."

I shook hands with Keno and picked up on an accent from one of the islands.

Daddy started laying down a driving rhythm on bass. I picked up the familiar chord changes of an old Rodgers and Hart standard called "Mountain Greenery" and yelled the name and the key over to Keno. I waded in on the second chorus and ran the melody. Daddy gave the nod to Keno for the third chorus, and I settled down to comp behind him. We alternated improvised lead and back-up through eight or nine choruses. By the time Daddy gave the closed fist sign to bring it back to the original melody for one last round, both Daddy and I had grins that bubbled up from the inner soul at the grace and maturity Keno poured into the horn.

We played set after set until close to four in the morning. I was nearly numb by the time I slapped Daddy's hand and said I needed at least two hours' sleep before facing the courtroom on Tuesday. As I left the stand, I wasn't surprised to hear Daddy offering Keno a regular gig on weekday nights.

Tuesday began with a jury trial in Cambridge. At three in the afternoon, I was about to launch into a closing argument when a message popped up on my cell phone. My secretary, Julie, cryptic to a fault, simply wrote, "Your father called. Keno arrested. Call quick."

My father had passed away when I was seven, which led me to believe the caller was Daddy, which must have left Julie wondering about my ethnicity.

As soon as court adjourned, I got in touch with Daddy at the club. He said a couple of plainclothes detectives came in about five A.M., an hour after I left. They put the cuffs on Keno and said something about an arson in the South End.

"What did Keno say?"

"He said he never heard of the South End. I told him to clam up till he talked to you."

"You're a good lawyer, Daddy. I'll see if I can find him."

I checked with the desk sergeant at the Suffolk County lockup where they hold prisoners awaiting trial. They had him. I presumptuously said I was his counsel, and they brought him to the counsel interviewing room.

He was taller than I remembered from the night before, probably six foot three or four, thin, and athletic looking. He was dark complected like Daddy. The goatee and mustache probably added a few years to his appearance, but I figured him for less than thirty.

He looked terribly alone, confused, and out of place when I first

walked in. He saw me for the first time in the light, and I'm sure he didn't recognize me from the night before.

We shook hands, and I told him Daddy had reached me. He seemed ill at ease and understandably nervous. He folded his lanky frame onto the metal chair and leaned over the table.

I started slowly.

"Where are you from, Keno?"

"From Haiti. I come two years ago. Been livin' in Philadelphia."

I was right about the accent.

"When did you come to Boston?"

"That's it. That's it, Mr. Knight."

"Call me Michael, Keno. That's what?"

"That's what I told them. I just come up to Boston Sunday. They say I burned some building last Friday."

"Interesting. That leaves two questions. Can you prove you were in Philadelphia until Sunday?"

"I was livin' with another musician. He seen me there all the time."

"I'll need his name and address. Second question. Why do the police think you did it?"

He just shook his head.

"You said you told this to the police. What else did you tell them?"

"Nothing."

"Good. Let that be the last thing you say till I tell you otherwise."

I was back in the office of my senior partner, Lex Devlin, by five o'clock. I filled him in on what little I knew about Keno's situation. He rocked his square granite frame in a leather desk chair that gave up a muted complaining squeal with every rock. His gaze down on the traffic of Franklin Street told me he was taking in every word. I gave him everything I knew, and told him so, to avoid an unnecessary grilling.

"Has he been indicted yet?"

"Like I said, Mr. Devlin . . ."

"Everything you know. And you don't even know if he's been indicted?"

"I've noticed you have a more terrifying effect on assistant district attorneys than I do. I think it's my youthful appearance."

He gave me that look, but he had the phone in his hand, and put it on speakerphone. He got through to the deputy district attorney, Billy Coyne, with whom he had had more knock-down drag-outs in court, and more pints of Guinness at Sullivan's in Court Square, than either of them cared to count.

"Billy, which of you heartless inquisitors is persecuting this poor lad, Westoba?"

"I'll ignore the scurrilous aspersions on the character of the people's good office in the spirit of take it from whence it comes. As a matter of fact, Alexis, I am."

Only Billy Coyne, who grew up only a few Irish tenements away from the birthplace of Mr. Devlin in Charlestown, could get away with calling him "Alexis" instead of Lex.

"And you're prosecuting on the basis of what, may I ask?"

That's exactly the kind of question that, coming from me, would cause most of the assistant D.A.'s to pull the cards closer to the chest.

"On the basis of an informant who identified your Mr. Westoba."

"And how do I find this informant?"

There was an uncharacteristic pause.

"I don't think so, Lex."

"Billy, take the wax out of your ears. This is me asking."

"I know it is, Lex. It's also your client, Mr. Westoba. My guess is you don't know a whole lot about him. This is a dirty business, Lex. My informant says he set fire to one of those old apartment buildings in the South End. One man died."

"What if I have an alibi witness who says my man was in Philadelphia until last Sunday?"

"You put on your witness. I'll put on mine. That's all we can do, Lex. Then it's up to the jury."

"Not if I get the case dismissed at the preliminary hearing, which I take it is tomorrow morning."

"Take your best shot, Lex. I still say it's a dirty business."

"What aren't you telling me, Billy?"

"You know where your guy's from originally, Lex?"

Mr. Devlin looked at me. I mouthed "Haiti." He repeated it to Mr. Coyne.

"The man who died in the fire arrived here from Haiti a while ago. He applied for asylum in this country. Claimed he'd be killed by one of the factions that's stirring up trouble if he was sent back to Haiti. He was also a musician. Both from Haiti, both musicians. Strange coincidence, what, Alexis?"

I whispered to Mr. D., "What was the name of the musician?"

He asked the question. I could hear Billy Coyne thumb through a file.

"Hector Makela. He was a regular at one of the jazz clubs up on Boylston Street."

My stomach did a jump-twist. I used to drop into The Jazz

Curtain on Boylston at least every few months to hear Makela. He combined African and island roots in a way I'd never heard on a sax.

"Your informant, Billy. Is he a Haitian too?"

I could hear the smile in Mr. Coyne's voice. "Ah Lex, you're cruising into forbidden waters. My informant stays under wraps."

"For the love of Pete, Billy, you'll have to produce him to testify at the preliminary hearing tomorrow."

"And that I shall do. Till then he's my little secret."

I was getting conflicting vibes. I'd left the jail with a solid feeling that Keno was a victim of circumstances at best, a frame-up at worst. On the other hand, Billy Coyne has a good nose for suspicious coincidences.

I went back to the jail for a quick word with Keno. I kept focus on his eyelids for telltale blinking when I asked him if he knew Hector Makela.

Keno said he'd never heard of him. And he never blinked. It had plausibility, since to my knowledge, Makela had never played out of New England and had never recorded.

In preparation for the preliminary hearing, which was scheduled for Wednesday morning, I needed a witness. Keno gave me the name, Sosa Agipa, and an address in Philadelphia.

This was too important to trust to a phone conversation. I made the drive down to Philadelphia that evening. The address took me to the heart of the Haitian community in West Philly. If the accents didn't say so, the cooking aromas were convincing.

I liked the fact that the apartment had two names above the bell, one of them being Keno's. I buzzed, but neither the entrance hall buzzer nor the lock on the door seemed to be working. I walked up three flights and knocked. A tall, lean, dark-complected man came to the door in his underwear.

I had no idea how I was going to sell the idea of his donning pants and joining me for a drive to Boston for a couple of days. It turned out to be the easiest part of my day. I explained the situation, and in half an hour he was clothed and beside me whistling up the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

Keno's preliminary hearing was held at the start of the trial day on Tuesday. The burden was on the prosecution to establish probable cause to believe the defendant had committed the crime charged, which was felony murder, in this case the commission of the felony of arson during which someone died.

Mr. Devlin and I were at the defense table with Keno. Safely ensconced two rows behind us was our defense witness, Sosa Agipa, who was ready, if not eager, to testify that his roommate had not left Philadelphia until the previous Sunday. The defense had no obligation to put in evidence, but if we could win a dismissal of the indictment at this stage, so much the better.

Billy Coyne was sitting unusually rigidly at the prosecution table suppressing what to my untrained eye looked like white-hot anger. There was none of the bantering between the two old war-horses that usually goes on, and I was getting an uncomfortable feeling.

Judge Mathis had the case called. Billy seemed to be in his own shell.

"Present your case, Mr. Coyne. I have a full docket."

Billy rose with an uncharacteristic stiffness.

"My case, Your Honor, is an eyewitness who is familiar with the defendant and who saw the defendant running from the apartment at the time of the start of the fire. One man died in the fire."

"Why didn't he run as well?"

"He couldn't, Your Honor. He was tied up and locked in a closet."

I watched Keno, who took all this in without a ripple.

"Please proceed with your witness, Mr. Coyne."

Billy braced with a grip on the edge of the table.

"I can't, Your Honor. My witness was shot to death this morning leaving his apartment to come to this hearing."

The heat of Billy's glance toward our client could be felt by both Mr. D. and myself as well. Judge Mathis picked it up.

"Do you have any other evidence, Mr. Coyne?"

"No, Your Honor. Not at this time."

The judge looked to the defense.

"Mr. Devlin?"

"Your Honor, I have a witness who will testify that of his knowledge, Mr. Westoba was in Philadelphia on Friday. He arrived in Boston on Sunday. I'd like to ask Mr. Coyne if he has obtained an indictment against my client."

Judge Mathis looked at Billy. Prosecution though he was, I was feeling pangs of sympathy for him.

"It was my intention to go before the grand jury this afternoon. Obviously that won't happen at this time."

The judge looked back at Mr. Devlin.

"Then I must move for the release of my client immediately, Your Honor."

The judge gave a frustrated look in Billy Coyne's direction before ordering the release of Keno. Billy Coyne was out of the

courtroom without a word. You could fry eggs on the ground he walked on.

I couldn't get Keno out of my mind that day or all day Wednesday. The uneasy feeling I had went back to our session at Daddy's on Monday night, but I couldn't put my finger on why.

I remembered that Daddy had given Keno a gig at the club on Wednesday nights. Around ten thirty I dropped by. I took a side table. Daddy gave me a surprised look and a grin from the bandstand. He and Keno were cooking on Cole Porter's "Let's Fall in Love" along with a guitarist and drummer I hadn't heard before.

Before the set ended, Daddy gave me an inviting nod toward the piano, but I just wanted to listen. By the end of the set, a light finally came on in my cranium, and I had a fix on the alarm that had been going off since the day before. It put a lead weight the size of a basketball in the pit of my stomach.

When Keno came off the stand, I asked him to join me for a drink. He didn't exactly leap at the invitation, but he joined me at an isolated table in the back. For someone who had just had the threat of a murder indictment lifted from his neck, he seemed to walk in a cloud of morose tension that you could slice. The fingers that didn't hold a glass were drumming nervously under the table.

We touched glasses, my Grouse to his Myers's rum, and he thanked me again for the help. Since he brought up the subject of the trial, it was easy for me to ask the question.

"You say you never heard Hector Makela play, right, Keno?"

"No, man. Never heard him."

"That would be a pity. He had a style all his own."

"Yeah, man. I guess."

"You'd know, Keno, because you're a great sax player. You're also a barefaced liar."

The drumming fingers stopped. He set down the glass. I had no idea whether he was set to fly at me or out the door.

"You knew Makela. You knew him well enough to pick up the phrasing and those riffs when he'd improvise. They were all his. They were like his fingerprints. I never heard it from another musician, until I heard it in your playing the other night. I couldn't place it, but then I heard it again tonight. Let's try it again, this time with a little bit of the truth. How well did you know Makela?"

There was no reaction for three seconds except to grip the table with both hands. Then he burst like a thoroughbred out of the gate. The chair spun across the room, and he was at top speed in two strides—smack into the brick wall of Daddy's chest. The

mountain scarcely moved, but Keno dropped to the floor off balance with Daddy's hand gripping his collar.

Daddy lifted him with one hand and half carried him to the room he used for an office at the back of the club. Daddy placed him in a chair and stood between him and the door.

I asked him again, "How did you know Hector Makela?"

His eyes darted from me to the door and the mass of Daddy blocking the only escape. Something in him just folded. The tension flowed out, and he was a bundle of shakes and sobs. I let it run for half a minute before asking the question again.

He just shook his head. I pressed him, and between the sobs he got out, "I can't."

"Can't what?"

"I want to. God help me. I can't."

I looked at Daddy. He shrugged. It summed up my feelings too. We were up a blind alley. I decided to try what the rules of evidence call "leading the witness." I got down beside him and tried for a calm voice.

"Keno, is someone threatening you? Are you afraid for your life?"

He just shook his head.

"Is it someone else? Are you afraid for your family?"

He didn't answer, but a shock wave ran through his body that was as good as a polygraph.

"Does someone have your family?"

He just buried his head in his hands. I could just make out, "I can't."

I looked up at Daddy, and his expression said what I was thinking. He'll never tell it. On the other hand, I figured there might be another way.

Thursday morning I had Julie clear my calendar for the day. By noon, I was cruising Interstate 95 back to Philly. The only loose end I could grab was our star alibi witness, Sosa Agipa, whom I trusted about as far as I could throw the Fleet Center.

With as little to go on as Keno's negative reactions, it seemed clear that some outfit large enough to pull it off was putting a serious squeeze on Keno by threatening his family. If Billy Coyne was right in believing that Keno torched the building, I chose to believe that he did it to save his family. I also chose to believe that whoever was behind it had also tied and gagged Makela and stuffed him in the closet without Keno's knowledge. They probably also lined up their man, Sosa, as an alibi witness just in case things went badly—such as Keno being spotted by an eyewitness—so that

Keno's conviction would not be traced back to them. Since all the parts seemed to be played by Haitians, I figured we could be playing with one of the rebel groups from that turbulent little island. That last guess did not set my heart at rest.

It was around nine at night when I pulled up again in front of Sosa's apartment in West Philly. The looks both I and my car were getting from the local worthies suggested I would do well to keep "hanging out" to a minimum.

Sosa was surprised to see me at the door. I left him with one enigmatic teaser.

"They called. They need you for another job. My car. Let's go."

What I said fortunately made more sense to him than it did to me. He was in the passenger seat in thirty seconds. We cruised in silence for more neutral territory—the base of the Philadelphia airport bridge.

I parked on the edge of a dark, desolate field. The sweat on Sosa's brow accented the look of confused uneasiness I was hoping for. I needed every edge since I was skating on no ice at all. I kept it calm and low, looking straight ahead.

"I had to call them. Keno's become a problem. He's falling apart. He's becoming dangerous. They want you to take care of him. I'll give you his address."

Sosa just looked at me with his mouth open.

"What are you talking about, man?"

"I'm delivering a message. Do I have to spell it out? You'll report to me when it's finished."

He was still unmoved. He looked at me like something under a microscope.

"Who are you, man? What have you got to do with anything?"

I dug down deep for a low, cool voice that was definitely not in character at the moment. This time I looked at him.

"I'm Keno's lawyer. Who do you think hired me? You think Keno can afford me? I'm also the one who keeps an eye on Keno to see he doesn't say things he shouldn't say. I can no longer guarantee that. I reported back. That's where you come in. Have we got a problem?"

He was thinking hard and fast, but he was also gaining self-confidence—the last thing I wanted him to have.

"Yeah, I got a problem, man. You don't look like one of us to me. How do I know . . . ?"

It was the moment I waited for. He couldn't have said it better if I wrote the script for him—which I practically did.

I flipped open my cell phone and handed it to him.

"Go ahead. Make the call. Check it out. It's good to be careful."

He was still eyeing me like some unknown species, but he took the phone. He stepped out of the car with his back to me while he tapped in the numbers. The window was open so I could hear the dialing. I hung onto my nerves while it rang. I heard him speak to whoever answered in some language I couldn't make out. Then he went silent as if he was waiting for someone to come on the phone.

In about ten seconds, he started talking the dialect again. This time his tone was quiet and deferential. He spoke for a bit and ended with what sounded like a question. Whatever was said on the other end must have been spicy because his side of the conversation was getting more and more animated, and he'd taken to glancing back at me. I let it roll since I was catching whatever Sosa was saying on my little hand-held recorder.

When the heat was reaching a peak, and before the looks became more ominous, I decided it was show time.

I leaned out the passenger window and said, "For the love of Pete, give me the phone. Let me talk to him."

Sosa looked confused, but I think he was relieved to be off the hot seat. He said a few words and handed the phone through the window.

I simultaneously grabbed the phone in my hot little hand and floored the gas pedal. The tires spun in the gravel, which gave Sosa the reflex time to grab the edge of the window. The tires began to grab solid ground and the car picked up speed with Sosa hanging on. It was at that moment as never before that I thanked the Lord and General Motors for electric windows. The glass slid up and cut off his grip.

When the car was back on pavement, I headed for I-95 in the direction of Boston. My last glance in the rearview mirror was at one highly agitated Haitian, waving his fists and screaming things in a language I was grateful not to understand.

As soon as I was well clear, I pulled over to the curb. I flipped open the cell phone Sosa had given back to me and hit the redial button. True to modern technology, the numbers that Sosa had just dialed reappeared on the screen. I wrote down the numbers and flipped the phone shut before anyone answered.

So far, I had executed half a plan. Something had needed to be done to get Keno's situation off dead center. He was no worse off, actually, except for the fact that he and his family and possibly myself were likely to be put on an immediate hit list. That called for an attempt to pull off the second half of what I laughingly called a plan.

I called Mr. Devlin. He was as delighted as I expected to be

wakened, but he read my tone and stopped yelling at me. He got Billy Coyne on the line and set up a three-way conversation. My hopes that Mr. Coyne had cooled down since our last meeting proved to be overly optimistic. I figured the best approach was a full frontal attack.

"Mr. Coyne, please just hold the phone and listen. You were right about Keno torching that building."

Mr. Devlin broke in to box my ears about client privilege, but I had to press on.

"It's just what you said, Mr. Coyne. It's a dirty business. But Keno's just a pawn. Whoever they are, they have his family. They'd have killed them if he didn't do it. I don't think he knew Makela was there. If we can work together, I think I can give you the big fish. Maybe the whole tank. Will you listen to me, Mr. Coyne?"

It took a few seconds, but he said a begrudging, "Yeah."

"Let's meet in Mr. Devlin's office tomorrow morning at nine. I'll give you what I've got. Will you do that?"

Again a few seconds. "What've you got?"

"It'll be worth the trip to the office. Mr. Devlin'll tell you I don't short on my promises."

Mr. Devlin came out of left field, bless him. "Go with him, Billy. If he says it, he'll do it."

"Alright, kid, I'll be there. But you better . . ."

"Good. Now the other half. I need something right away or everyone that can make this happen will be in a box by tomorrow morning. I need you to have Keno taken into protective custody as soon as you can find him. They've probably got a hit man on the way already. Will you do it?"

I was moving a bit fast for Billy Coyne's comfort level, but he agreed.

"One more. Can you get the Philadelphia police to arrest Sosa Agipa? He was our alibi witness. I'll give you his address. He's the key."

"On what charge?"

"Accessory to the murder of Makela. The Haitians set him up as a phony alibi witness. He was part of the whole thing."

Mr. Coyne was not delighted to be flying blind under my navigation, but he agreed.

I made the drive to Boston and caught a few hours' sleep at a motel instead of my apartment out of an excess of caution.

At nine the next morning, the three of us met in Mr. Devlin's office. It was put-up-or-shut-up time. I gave Mr. Coyne the tape recording of Sosa's half of the phone conversation outside of my

car the previous night. I told him that a translation would probably give him enough evidence to indict Sosa for conspiracy in the arson and murder of Makela. If he could get it done that morning, all to the good. My guess was that a serious threat of the death penalty might go a long way in inducing Sosa to flip—that, plus a little nudge that I could provide and Billy Coyne couldn't. If a deal were struck for protected witness status, Sosa could hand Mr. Coyne the big shots on a platter. That thought had him salivating, but still dubious.

"So far, kid, you've given me nothing. So I nail Sosa Agipa instead of Keno Westoba. It's one low-level punk instead of another. Even if Agipa flips, we can't locate the heads of this outfit. We've been at this for years. They move around more than Gypsies. They pull a robbery or extortion to get money for guns to send to some band of rebels in Haiti. Every time we get close to tracking them down, they move to another location. Their headquarters was that apartment your client torched, probably to do away with Makela. He found out more than they wanted him to know. Now who knows where they are?"

"I do."

"Say what?"

"I do."

"Where?"

"Not yet, Mr. Coyne. This is where we do some serious dealing. I have only one concern here. Keno and his family. I want your word that you won't move in until I try to get his family out of their hands. I need to make one more move."

I don't think he could believe what he was hearing from this boy-lawyer. Fortunately, I had Mr. Devlin's backing for clout. It took a minute, but I finally heard the words I needed to hear.

"How long?"

"Sometime today."

"If this doesn't work, kid, I promise you I'll . . ."

"If this doesn't work, Mr. Coyne, you'll be the least of my problems."

I gave him the telephone number that I had gotten from my cell phone when I hit the redial after Sosa had called headquarters. Mr. Coyne called a number and got the address that went with the phone number. He gave me the address in the Roxbury section of Boston, and the game was on.

I changed into a close-fitting T-shirt and jeans and took a cab to the Roxbury address. Most of the people in the street were African American, but when my cab pulled up to the curb, I

noticed two tall, wiry dudes with Haitian features leaning against the door at the top of the front steps. The loose, island shirts showed contours that were more like weapons than parts of their anatomy.

They zeroed in, and their eyes never left me from the time I got out of the cab. When I approached the steps they were down on each side of me.

"You're in the wrong place, man. Nothing for you here."

It was be-cooler-than-you've-ever-been-in-your-life time.

"That depends. I've got an offer for the man upstairs. He may be upset with you boys if he doesn't hear it. Suppose you tell him Keno's lawyer wants to see him."

They looked at each other. One of them turned and went up into the house. The other one turned me around for a closer look. He gave me a pat-down, but the tight-fitting clothes made it easy to tell I wasn't carrying anything dangerous or electronic and, as I had hoped, saved me a full search.

I saw faces appear and look down from a third story window. In about three minutes, the one who left was back, and the two of them escorted me up the steps. I walked between them up two flights. The corridor seemed to buzz with tall males of the same Haitian cut, smoking and hanging out in the corridor.

Each pair of eyes scanned every inch of this scrawny Anglo as my escorts led me into the first room on the right. I was grateful that the plan, such as it was, did not depend on blending.

The room held six others about the same size, four draped on the assorted overstuffed furniture and two at the window to see what else might have followed this specimen into the neighborhood.

The man in the lead rapped on a closed door across the room. Something was said from inside. He opened the door and stepped back. I took that as an invitation.

I walked up to the table in the middle of a room. A quick scan told me that there were five others scattered around the room, any one of whom could take me apart like a chicken. There was also a feeble old man rocking in a chair in the corner. Center stage, seated behind the table, was the one who made my stomach clench. The black shaved skin of his head emphasized the two pits of burning coal that were looking deep into my soul. I promised myself that if I ever walked out of that room alive, I'd switch to real estate law.

"So you've got a message for me, lawyer. What's the message?"

His voice was low, heavily accented, and full of the confidence I wanted to exude. I gave it my best shot.

"Not so much a message. It's an offer."

A grin came across his face. "What you got to offer me?"

I ignored the grin. "Nothing."

He froze a bit, but the grin came back. "You playin' with me, man?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I'm not even talking to you. I'm talking to the man in charge."

The old man in the corner stopped rocking. He slowly got out of the chair and walked over to the table. One motion of his head got Coal Eyes out of the chair, and the old man sat down.

The white of his beard and scant hair stood out against the weathered ebony skin. He moved with more grace than his age would have indicated.

"You're a clever young man."

"And you're an operation that moves around fast. I figured it was unlikely that a man of your years would be along as just baggage. I mean that respectfully."

He smiled. "I so take it. Now to business. What's this offer?"

He was a man who inspired direct talk.

"You have Keno Westoba's family. And you have him in your grip. You wanted control for two reasons. You wanted Keno to burn a building. That's done. The second reason is to prevent him from causing you problems with anything he might say to the police. A man died in the fire. If Keno were to tell what he knows, you could all be facing a murder charge. You therefore need insurance that he won't."

I paused. He was listening with his eyes closed. He opened them, looked at me, and said without commitment, "Go on."

"The insurance you were counting on expired. It no longer works. I can offer you new insurance."

I doubted that the deliberate calm in his voice was still legitimate.

"Expired, you say? What does 'expired' mean here?"

"Keno is in the hands of the police. They have him out of harm's way and available as a witness. Keno is ready to tell them everything he knows—or not, depending on what I tell him when I see him."

The old man raised his palms. "If, as you say, we are holding his family, I only say 'if,' what makes you think he will say something now that he wouldn't say yesterday?"

"Today he's heard that all of his family is dead at your hands."

Now I had his attention. The mask of coolness was gone. I was either cooking or cooked.

"And where would he hear such a thing?"

"I told him."

I was playing a little loose with the truth on that one, but on average I was hewing to the line of honesty. I reinforced it.

"Keno believes you've killed them all. I made him promise to say nothing to the police until I talked to you. I can see to it that he continues to say nothing. Permanently."

"And at what price."

"You bring every one of his family that you're holding to this room. We leave together. I take them to Keno and show him they're alive and free. He will promise to say nothing. One thing more. Keno will execute a sworn affidavit disclosing everything he knows about you and give it to me. It will be in a safe place with instructions to deliver it to the police if any accident occurs involving Keno, his family, or for that matter, me."

I could sense the wheels were turning. There was one last play.

"You're wondering how you can believe me. Is Keno really with the police? May I use your phone?"

He nodded to the telephone in front of him.

"I'm calling the district attorney's office. I'll put it on the speaker so you can listen."

The receptionist at the district attorney's office answered. I asked to be connected to Deputy District Attorney William Coyne. When Mr. Coyne picked up, I said, as we had planned, "This is Michael Knight. Please contact Keno Westoba wherever he's being held. Please have him call this number and simply say one sentence and hang up. Please have him say, 'I'm in protective custody and I'm waiting to hear from Mr. Knight.' "

Two hundred years went by in the next ten minutes until the phone rang and sent both of our heart rates over two hundred. I let the old man answer it. He just listened and then slowly lowered the phone.

The old man looked at the others and then back at me. I could read what was going through his mind.

"If you're thinking of moving out and going underground somewhere else, I suggest you look out that window."

He nodded to one of the men close to the window. The man looked out the window and said something rapid and tense to the old man in their language. I thanked God once again that Billy Coyne had come through with police cars in the street at both exits.

I looked him straight in the eye.

"The deal is on the table. If I walk out of here with all of Keno's family, I'll see to it that he says nothing. The police will not have him as a witness against any of you. I can get the police cars to go away."

"And I should trust you because . . . ?"

"Because this time, the shoe's on the other foot. This time you

have no other option. I'm offering you the only way out. Otherwise you all face the death penalty, and whatever cause you're working for goes down with you."

The old man, to his credit, remained unflustered. He gave it a minute's thought, during which time I reviewed all the regrets of my life—the greatest being getting into this situation.

When he stood up, I knew what a defendant feels like on trial for his life, when the judge says to the foreman of the jury, "Please read the verdict."

I was still in the dark when the old man shouted an order in dialect to one of the men and sat down in silence. He never looked at me for the next five minutes.

An eternity later, the same man came back through the door with a woman about Keno's age and two small children.

The old man still never looked at me. I threw him one last bone.

"When these people and I get into the police car downstairs, we'll leave. You'll be free to move the whole operation wherever you want. I'll go directly to Keno and keep my part of the bargain."

He nodded, and the men drew back from the doorway. I took the woman and each of us carried a child. We moved slowly through the hall and down the stairs and into the waiting police car. The woman was in tears, clutching the children, and I exhaled for the first time since I entered that building.

We drove directly to where Keno was being held in protective custody. I had the pleasure of bringing his wife and children to him. I thought he'd burst an eardrum with the scream he let out when he saw them. There were tears enough to flood the Charles River, and I don't think a tank could pry apart the embrace that glued the four of them together.

Deal or not, I had little trust in the Haitian mobsters. I wanted Keno and his family out of there. I used the reunion time to contact Daddy. I knew he had contacts in the jazz world all over the country. True enough, he made a phone call to a contact in Kansas City, a neat little jazz town far from Boston and Philadelphia. With his recommendation of Keno's talent, he was able to set up a steady gig in a jazz club with a musician who took Daddy's word as gospel.

There was just one promise left unfulfilled—this one to Billy Coyne. I made the trip back to Philadelphia to pay a call on Sosa Agipa in the lock-up where he was being held. At Mr. Coyne's

request, the Philadelphia police were holding him for extradition to stand trial in Boston.

Considering how we last parted company, there were no hugs and kisses when we met. He fell into a sullen silence, which let me do the talking.

"You may think you had a bad day yesterday, Sosa. I guarantee you, today's worse. I just paid a visit to the big shot. You're very much on his mind. He and the boys are about to be picked up for the murder of Hector Makela. Keno won't testify against him. That leaves just you between him and the death penalty. How far do you suppose he trusts you at this moment, especially since he remembers that you were the one who led me to him?"

His muscles looked tense, but the only outward reaction was a sneer. He was probably thinking of the small army of Haitian muscle that blocked the path to the boss.

"You didn't see no one. You're a lying . . ."

The rest is better not set in print. I kept my cool.

"It's your life, Sosa. You can end it any way you want. Just one thought. You're being indicted for being an accessory to the murder of Makela. Any way you look at it, you're going to be spending a lot of time in the prison population. There are a number of Haitians mixed in there. You could even draw one as a cellmate. I guess maybe you're familiar with what they do to comrades they think might rat them out."

He turned to stone.

"I'm offering you full security in the witness protection program. In other words, I'm offering you your life in exchange for your testimony."

His silence told me he still had his doubts about any of this—particularly my meeting with his boss. I got up and headed for the door. I gave him one last shot before leaving.

"It's your call, Sosa. I'm just the messenger. By the way, your big secret boss? I'm surprised that he's a little guy, must be in his seventies, white thinning hair, white beard over black skin, has a gash about here on his chin. Tough cookie though. *Adieu*, Sosa."

I left him with the look of creeping panic I was hoping to instill. I heard later that when they took him back, as he approached the door of his cell, he looked in at a Haitian inmate sitting on his bunk. That could have been an arranged coincidence. The inmate said one word to him in the Haitian dialect, and it sent Sosa into the arms of the guard and from there, directly into the witness protection program.

As planned, when Billy had the police cars pull away from the house in Roxbury as I had promised after I took Keno's family out,

he had a couple of undercover officers follow the old man and his band of merry men as they moved headquarters to another part of the city. They were sitting ducks for arrest as soon as Sosa began supplying testimony.

I was in Daddy's on a Monday night about a month later. He took me into his office. He had that grin when he played me a tape he had just received from an address in Kansas City. It was a jazz trio that was really cooking. I could pick out the familiar riffs and phrases of the saxophone in the midst of his improvisation. I thought it was neat that our man, Keno, was keeping alive the spirit of Hector Makela. 🐦

k.j.a. wishnia

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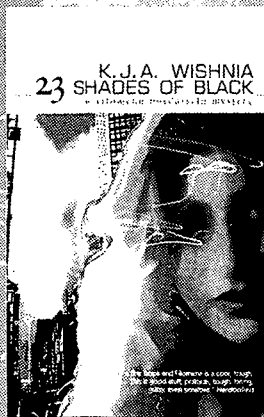
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THE BODY IN THE SPRING

KEVIN PRUFER

The child had rolled with the waves all night, her hair spread around her like sea grass or a reflection of clouds. Her hands slept at her sides, and as the waves lifted her body, her back seemed to arch just slightly, her head tilted back into a heavenward gaze. She did not blink. Neither was she beautiful, though parts of her had that moonlit quality one might find in a page from an old story-book, something romantic, something cast against the slowly brightening cliffs of Dover. But this wasn't Dover, and the men around her, tugging her gently to shore with hooked sticks, weren't lovers. A woman took a picture with a flash, and off by the boats, the man who'd found her cradled his head in one hand and seemed to sleep.

And then they had her, pulled her against the tall grass along the shore. The woman with the camera took another picture, and they lifted her, wrapped her carefully in a white cloth, and carried her past the yellow crime-scene tape to the back of a truck, where they spread her on a pallet.

Later, they'd say that she'd seemed to have aged in the drive from Pertle Springs to the coroner's office in Kansas City. Unwrapping her, Detective Armand would gasp, because this wasn't a girl at all, but a grown woman of perhaps twenty-five or thirty. And how had he missed the wedding ring? Of course, she was small—that accounted for his misperception—and the moonlight, because the full moon had been out early that morning, had softened her features. In the harsh light of the coroner's office, she was no longer beautiful at all but, like any early death, both horrible and vaguely touching. She had a cut on her lip, but it had healed. And when the coroner snipped away her flowered blouse and traced over her belly with a cotton swab, he noticed that jagged smile of a caesarian section. Otherwise, nothing. No wound, no purse, nothing to give her name or history away.

They hadn't been looking for her. They'd been looking for a ten-year-old girl who'd vanished with a redhaired man from the woods behind the Community Center, not a grown woman who'd slipped, perhaps, from a boat or the pier and had been dragged under. This wasn't his victim, was probably no victim at all. She was nobody's victim.

But that night she returned to him. He lay in bed alone and recalled her face: gape-mouthed, the way the moonlight shone off her teeth. He recalled her feet, how they bobbed on the water, one foot unshod. Where had the other black pump gone? He imagined it rocking gently on the bottom of the lake, sifting into the sediment, half buried, now buried completely.

He remembered the man who'd found her, how he'd touched Armand's shoulder and looked into his eyes. "I don't know her," he'd said. "I was out for a walk and out of the corner of my eye—"

He fixed himself a drink—bourbon, neat—and sat in front of the television. Too many nights alone, he thought, too many nights without Marcia. Twelve, no thirteen, weeks. Thirteen weeks.

"Wrong stiff," Franklin said. "All the way to Warrensburg for the wrong stiff?" He laughed. "No shit?"

"It's true," Armand said. They'd spent the morning knocking on doors, quizzing unfamiliar people in strange living rooms. Two children had seen the redhaired man take the girl by the hand and lead her through the woods, a shortcut to the parking lot. They'd thought he was her father. One of the camp counselors leaned against the door frame and cried. She'd been in charge.

"Wrong fucking stiff," Franklin said again. "Lighten up! The girl might be alive yet." They were in the Plymouth, an unmarked police-issue. It smelled of Lysol and aftershave.

"Sure, sure." He sipped his coffee.

"Cheer up, friend. You gotta get back in the world." Franklin nudged him gently, turned the radio up. Some rap tune.

"I didn't sleep, that's all. Who's next?"

And so they drove on and on, into the night, from house to house. He called the coroner twice, but no one had turned in a lead on the drowned woman. There was no reason to suspect foul play; she'd slipped, most likely. Hit her head on the edge of the pier—no one had found a stray boat anywhere—and was pulled under. Could happen to anyone, especially after a couple drinks and a rain to make the wood slick.

And no leads on the redhaired man or the girl, his fourth victim, nothing. Franklin said, "I'm gonna clock out for the night, Armand. You want to stop by for dinner?"

"I'm good."

"You need company, my man. I'll call Shavonne. She'll put an extra plate down. Have dinner with us. It's not healthy, sitting around your house all evening watching *Cops*. You gotta get back among the living."

Marcia, his wife, drove off one evening and never came back. Someone had found the car smashed against a utility pole on North 350 near the airport. Smashed and flipped over so glass scattered like sharp little ice shavings on the snowy road. In the police photograph—he insisted on seeing the photograph, though Franklin urged him not to, urged him to let others handle it—the scene was half veiled in snow squall. The flash had caught the tail-light and glared. The Civic, he thought, looked like an insect turned and helpless on its back. That night, he'd fought with Marcia, and now he wished she'd just kept driving. It would be so much easier if she'd just kept driving, driving, driving out of Kansas City to Iowa, to Minnesota, north and north and away. He closed his eyes.

About that time, the girls began to vanish. First a little blond child, seven years old, from River Market. And then another, and another. A girl vanished every month now in Kansas City—and a uniform tending the parking meters said he saw the latest disappear around the corner with a man in an army jacket, a man with red hair. Every month, and Franklin and Armand had driven up and down the streets, knocked on doors.

"I need to think about a career change," Franklin said.

Silence.

"Redheaded cracker. Only time a black man isn't public enemy number one in this town. I'd say it was a relief—"

Armand grinned at that.

"Gotcha," Franklin said. "You cracked a smile."

Later, he called the coroner again, who seemed irritated now. "No," he said, "no news. Nobody's come forward. No one's claimed the body. Why do you care?" Armand shrugged, put the cell phone away.

He and Franklin drove and drove through the streets of Kansas City.

An old woman in a housedress said she'd seen the redheaded man in line at the Piggly Wiggly, said he bought a turkey baster and a set of Ginsu knives. "You know what he's doing with those girls?" she asked. "Isn't it obvious?"

And each night, he lay awake, remembering the body in the spring, how she floated. He remembered the officer taking pic-

tures, the glare of the flash. The men hauling the body in. He remembered the one who found her, his downturned hunter's hat pulled low over his eyes, shaking his head. Was he crying? Yes, he was crying.

And then one morning a little girl got away. She'd been missing for just under a day and when Armand arrived, she was cowering in a corner of the station, knees drawn up to her chin. She was eight, maybe nine, and had run down the dark streets of Westport in her bare feet and nightgown. He sat with her in the playroom, a woman from psychological services at his right. "What do you remember about him?" the woman asked. "It's okay."

The girl shook her head. She'd been home already, spent the night with her parents, wore clean clothes, a new pair of shoes, and her parents watched from the other side of the one-way glass. "It's okay," the woman said. "You don't have to say anything."

The girl shook her head.

"Would you like to draw a picture? We could draw a picture." She knelt beside the girl with a pad of paper and a new box of crayons.

And the girl began to draw. First an inscrutable house—lopsided windows, an arch for a door, yellow walls—then a man in a green jacket with big eyes and a red mouth. She drew a tower in the background.

"That's a very tall tower," the woman said.

The girl kept drawing.

"What kind of tower is it? Is it a stone tower?"

The girl shook her head. She drew intensely.

"Well, it's a very nice tower."

"It's not a tower," the girl said with finality. "It's a Christmas tree."

The woman nodded.

"Well, it's a very nice Christmas tree. Is this where you were last night?"

The girl kept drawing. She winced, though, and her hand tightened over the crayon. Armand missed nothing.

In the car, hours later, Franklin shook his head. "Who has a Christmas tree in March? We should arrest that guy for unseasonable conduct."

Armand smiled.

"I saw that," Franklin said. "You're just full of joy and goodwill these days, my man. Full of smiles."

"Yeah, yeah."

They drove up and down the streets of Westport, looking at yellow houses. There were more than he'd expected—it seemed every fifth house was some version of yellow. Tan, beige, goldenrod.

And then, parked in front of one with an arch for a door, Franklin said, "Gotcha."

"Gotcha what?"

"Gotcha." He pointed out the car window, into the air.

"What?" Armand said. "I don't see anything."

"The water tower," Franklin said. "Look at its legs." Armand looked. Three legs rose from behind the row of low-income houses, meeting neatly at three points at the reservoir's base. "I don't see it as a Christmas tree," he said.

"Look closer." And Armand looked, narrowing his eyes until he could make out a coil of wires running up each leg. "Lights?" he said.

"Lights," Franklin replied.

"Oh, hell." Armand leaned back in the seat.

"Downtown beautification," Franklin said. "Spruce up this ugly shit with colored lights. No doubt it looks like a giant Christmas tree all night long."

They found him in the bedroom, reading a book, which he did not put down even as the detectives entered. He turned the page and they pointed a gun at him, cuffed him, and led him from the house. They sealed the house with yellow tape. The woman with the camera arrived and took pictures of the room, the little row of photographs pinned to the wall, a smudge by the baseboards, a tiny yellow shirt. She took picture after picture while Armand leaned against the wall and watched until his eyes hurt from the flash.

Once they'd brought him in, locked him away, the redhaired man became meaningless. He went the way of any criminal, in fact or fiction. Caught and thus of little consequence except to those he harmed. An abstraction, a bit of bone for the cogs and wheels to grind away.

That night Armand lay in bed, remembering the woman in the spring. Her hands had floated so softly by her sides, and when a wave crested beneath her, her body seemed to ripple with it. He recalled how a pole had caught her at the neck and pulled her slowly through the reeds and the grasses to the shore where the woman with the camera waited.

And the man who'd first found the body, how he shook Armand's hand gently. "I didn't know her," he'd said. Armand grew

sleepy. He put his empty glass on the bedside table. "I didn't know her," though in the fog of half-sleep the man smiled slightly, a cruel red gash for a mouth. "I didn't know her," he said again, smiling openly now, squeezing Armand's hand. "I didn't, sorry. No." And Armand breathed heavily now, asleep, remembering, also, his wife's car tipped over, the scattering of glass. "No, no," the man said, smiling broadly. "I just saw her there, floating, out of the corner of my eye." He shook his head. From beneath his downturned hunter's hat, a tuft of red hair. 🐦

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

MKEPTK LAU LHJN MTPXYLW WLK JXYYKW PXW PE
WLK BHWKT LK LKHTN LPPEMKHWU, IXEEVKN MF WLK
WLAOR VKHE IPVN PE WLK EPTKUW EVPPT.

—HJJK BKUWPJ

CIPHER:

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 139

THE METHOD IN HER MADNESS

TOM SAVAGE

She knew she shouldn't be in here. This was his sanctuary, his private domain, his holy of holies. If he found her here, he would not hesitate to call the police, or worse, and he would be back any minute. Still, she had to do this. The voices had told her to do it, and the eyes were watching her.

A sudden flash of light at the big window of his oak-paneled, book-lined study was followed almost immediately by the sound of crashing thunder. The muted noise of the rain continued from outside, beyond the leaded glass and the red velvet curtains that framed the casement. She stood in the center of the room, the water from her wet blond hair and her stolen black trench coat slowly dripping onto the Oriental carpet, listening. The rain, the echo of thunder, the heavy pounding of her anxious heart: otherwise, nothing. For now.

At the moment, she didn't hear the voices.

"I really shouldn't be in here," she said aloud, and then she focused on what she must do and went over to his desk. She knew everyone else in the house was gone. His wife, Dolores, was playing bridge at her club in town, as she did every Saturday night, and the servants had the weekend off. He was alone here.

Or so he thought.

She was in this house with him, in this thunderstorm, and anything could happen to her when he discovered her presence. Even so, she knew she must confront him now, tonight, and make him understand. She had to persuade him to do the right thing and tell everyone the truth about her, admit to them that he'd lied about her to get rid of her and save his marriage. So much depended on convincing him to do this: her reputation, her happiness, her freedom, her very sanity.



Tim Foley

Sanity. That word again. How many times had she heard that word in the last three years? Those three long, long years in that awful place, with its constant stream of doctors and nurses and specialists. The drugs to make her sleep, the drugs to wake her up, the drugs to keep her calm and prevent her from harming herself or others. That was the excuse, anyway. The drugs were really to make her docile, manageable, unable to tell her story clearly and ask for help. *He* had ordered this treatment of her, and the doctors and nurses readily obeyed him. As well they should: he was one of the mental hospital's major benefactors, and he had easily convinced the judge that she belonged there after she'd attacked him.

Attack, indeed! It had been a fight, just an ordinary lovers' quarrel, and it had taken place in this very room. He'd told her they had to stop seeing each other, that his wife had found out about them, that he loved his wife, that it had to stop, and she—well, she had resisted the idea. They'd said ugly things, and he'd slapped her, and then she'd picked up the letter opener on his desk. It wasn't really a knife, just a silly letter opener, and she hadn't cut him badly, only a scratch. A few stitches and he was fine. But to hear what he'd told the police after he summoned them, you would have thought she'd assaulted him with an axe. Later, at the hearing, he told the court all about their most intimate conversations, how she'd admitted to him once or twice that she sometimes heard voices and felt eyes watching her.

She never should have told him about that, but how was she to know he'd one day use it against her in his zeal to be rid of her? He was Clifton Taggart III, America's leading Shakespearean scholar. She was merely Jessica Loman, a poor, gullible college girl, an English major who dreamed of someday being a novelist. She'd only taken the part-time job as his personal assistant to help pay her tuition. She was nobody, really—but she'd had a record of psychiatric counseling for chronic depression, and fighting with other children in school, and a brief bout with anorexia.

The depression had been with her, on and off, since she'd lost her father, and the fighting in school hadn't been her fault. That stupid Sally Denning shouldn't have called her a weirdo in the playground, right in front of all the other kids. She hadn't meant to hit Sally quite so hard, and the dentist had fixed Sally's two broken teeth, so what was the big deal? The eating disorder in college had only lasted a year. Well, two years . . .

Mrs. Parker, her high school guidance counselor—and *not* a professional analyst—had been called as a witness, and the nasty old bag had offered the court her ridiculous opinion that Jessica was "a borderline schizophrenic with tendencies toward paranoia."

Then the dean of her college had testified, telling everyone about the anorexia and that other little incident in college, when she'd threatened the psychiatrist. The judge, not surprisingly, had accepted all this and announced that Jessica would be remanded to Northern State Hospital. When he'd asked Jessica if she had anything to say in her own behalf, she'd been sobbing too hard to utter a single word. The final bang of his gavel still echoed in her ears these three years later, mingling with the sounds of rain and thunder from outside.

They'd only let her out once in all this time, to attend her mother's funeral, and even then she was under heavy guard. Her father had died when she was nine years old, and her mother had always been in delicate health. The shock and stress of Jessica's commitment to a mental facility had sent Mother to an early grave. She'd stood in the freezing cemetery, flanked by hospital attendants, staring down at her mother's cheap pine coffin, the only one she could afford, silently cursing the man who had caused all this. The man whose testimony had caused her to be institutionalized. The man who had murdered her mother as certainly as if he had shot her. He'd told her mother and everyone else in the courtroom—in the *world*—that she was insane.

But I'm not insane, she thought. I'm *not*!

She allowed these thoughts to register, and then she reached down and swiftly pulled open his desk drawer. A memory of his old habits came back to her, and his old phobia, his constant fear of robbers. Well, with his fortune—or, rather, his wife's fortune—that was quite understandable. He'd mentioned to her once, back in the good times when she was still his part-time secretary and full-time lover, before their abrupt parting of the ways three years ago, that he kept a loaded revolver in this drawer.

Papers . . . pens . . . yes. Here it was. She felt the cold metal touching her fingers, then grasped the handle and slowly pulled the gleaming black object out and held it up to the light. She stood there behind his desk, peering at the alien thing in her outstretched hand, feeling its chill. It was then, in that suspended moment, that she experienced the distinct, familiar feeling, as frightening as it was welcome. She became aware once more of the eyes watching her, and she heard the voices.

They weren't speaking, not words that she could hear, at any rate. They were merely whispering, gasping and hissing in the darkness over there, just beyond her vision. Their noises of shock and outrage were informing her that she was bad, that what she was doing was wrong. The disembodied voices were her frequent companions in the hospital, some days her only companions, and

she had mastered the self-preserving art of subverting them, of ignoring the sounds and pretending they weren't there, particularly when the doctors were with her. Tonight, away from the hospital, the voices seemed unusually agitated:

She would not listen to them. Not now.

As another bolt of lightning flashed and thunder cracked outside, she slowly lowered the heavy revolver to her side and slipped it into the pocket of the black trench coat. She gazed carefully around the room, orienting herself, making a new catalogue of this familiar environment. She'd been in this place many times in the days when she was his secretary. Over there was the door to the kitchen at the back of the ground floor, the way she had come in tonight. On the opposite side of the room was the bigger door, the one that led to the central hallway and the rest of the house. In one corner of the room, in front of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, was the five-foot marble column on which rested his most prized possession, the huge marble bust of William Shakespeare. She stared at the gaudy tribute, shaking her head slowly and smiling in mild disgust at the arrogance of the man who had placed it there.

He was upstairs, probably planning his evening's work—some new and brilliant essay on some Act Three speech by Feste or Hotspur or Beatrice, no doubt, to be included in his next major tome, which would have some title like "The Origins and Interpretations of Gesture and Regional Grammar in the Bard's Second Period, 1595-1601: A Consideration." He would be changing out of his dinner clothes into his silk pajamas and red satin smoking jacket. *Smoking jacket*: his fancy phrase. It was a bathrobe, for heaven's sake! But Clifton Taggart III, America's leading Shakespearean scholar, didn't wear a mere bathrobe. Oh, my dear, no! Clifton Taggart III wore a *smoking jacket*.

She hadn't made any sort of plan before coming in here. She'd managed to slip out of the hospital undetected, which had actually been much easier than she'd imagined. She'd simply swiped the trench coat and a nurse's cap from the closet nearest to the dorm, thrown them on over her nightgown, and walked right out the front door, nodding to the doddering old security man at the front desk as she went. He'd actually glanced up from his newspaper and waved to her as she passed him. Then she'd made her way here, to this house. A little over a mile in the rain, but she'd kept to the fields and woods beside the roads, and no one had seen her.

Well, no one had *noticed* her, anyway. Why should they? A tall young woman in a belted black coat, hurrying through the light rain that would soon grow heavier was hardly an astonishing sight. The two remarkable details of her appearance, had the people in

the passing cars been close enough to see, were the white cotton nightgown under the coat and the fact that she was barefoot. The only shoes she could find in her haste in the pitch-black dormitory were her slippers, paper-thin little things, fuzzy and insubstantial. She hadn't put the slippers on, and she hadn't dared to feel her way over to the communal closet and rummage for her sneakers for fear of waking one of the others.

So, a plan. Well, she could hide in here, but where? She looked around her, assessing each section of the room for potential places of concealment. Another flash of lightning at the window made her look over there again, and her gaze slowly lowered from the red velvet curtain-framed glass to the matching red velvet upholstered cushion on the deep shelf at the bottom. She smiled.

The window seat. She'd forgotten all about it.

With a swift glance over at the door to the hallway, she moved quickly away from the desk and over to the window. She reached down, feeling the soft texture of the rich crimson material on the cushion, then grasped the edge firmly in her hands and lifted. The entire top of the seat came up on its silent hinges, and she rested the cushioned shelf against the window frame, gazing down into the large, empty storage space inside the seat.

She was standing there, staring down, when she became aware of the new sounds. Not the voices, not this time. These sounds were different in quality, and they were not products of her fevered imagination. Someone was coming down the main staircase to the hall. Clifton. She glanced over at the door, then down at the open window seat. She could get inside there and hide, wait for him to leave the room again, or—

No. She hadn't come all this way to be a coward. She would stand her ground here, now, in this room. She would do what she'd come here to do. She was Jessica Loman, and she would confront her enemy. With a decisive little nod of her head, she slowly closed the lid of the window seat and walked forward into the center of the room. She stood there, facing the door that would open at any moment, aware of the eyes watching her, and the whispers. They were waiting here with her, waiting to see what would happen next, and Mother was with them. She could feel her mother's intense, loving gaze upon her. Yes, Mother was here with her, and everything was going to be all right . . .

The door opened, and he came striding confidently into the room. Her heart leaped and her stomach lurched when she saw him, and she willed herself to control them. He hadn't changed much, she noted instantly: tall and handsome, with his dark eyes and trim mustache and the attractive streaks of gray at the temples

in his otherwise glossy black hair. And yes, indeed, he was wearing the red satin smoking jacket over his silk pajamas. She'd known he would be wearing it.

When he saw the young woman standing in the middle of his study, he froze. He actually emitted a small gasp and took one awkward little step backward, toward the open door behind him, staring. There was a single second of pure terror on his face, and she felt a thrill of triumph surge through her at the thought that she had caused him even this momentary distress.

He recovered quickly. In the next instant the vision registered on him, and he recognized her. He sucked in a long, deep breath, and his dark eyebrows shot upward in what might have been quizzical amusement. He apparently decided that he was not in danger, and he carefully shut the door behind him and stepped forward again, immediately taking charge of this new situation.

"Most sure the goddess on whom these airs attend!" he announced in his rich, deep voice, flashing that deceptively easy, offhand smile that had once thrilled her. Now she found it repulsive. She found *him* repulsive, and more than a little ridiculous. He stood there, smiling at her, and she could feel his gaze raking over her, making a study of her from her wet hair to her dripping trench coat to her naked feet. He took it all in slowly, seeming almost to savor every peculiar detail of her. Then he drew in another long breath. In a surprisingly gentle tone of voice, he said, "Jessica, what on earth are you doing here?"

"Hello, Clifton," she said evenly. "How lovely to see you again."

The lazy smile faded, and he glanced past her, looking quickly around the room behind her. "How did you—"

"How did I get in here?" she asked. "Easy. You still have that Hide-a-Key rock next to the kitchen door. I'm surprised at you, Cliff—everybody can spot those things from a mile away. Why, *anyone* could just walk right in here!" She noticed that he was still looking around the room. "You needn't worry. I'm quite alone. We're alone together, you and I, just like old times. Isn't that strange?"

He was staring at her again. "As strange as the thing I know not," he murmured. Then, dropping his favorite playwright, he said, "They must be out looking for you."

"Oh, I don't think so," she said, trying desperately to make her voice sound light and carefree as she moved away from him, carefully putting the big oak desk between them. "You see, darling, they don't even know I'm gone."

He came farther into the room, still eyeing her warily. "How did you get out of the hospital?"

She shrugged, deciding not to tell him lest he inform the people there. She might want to use the strategy in the future. "Never mind. The point is that I'm here. Don't worry, I'm going back there as soon as we're finished here. You needn't call anyone."

"As soon as we're—*finished* here?" he said. "And what, pray tell, are we going to do?"

She faced him across the length of his desk. "We're going to talk, Cliff. And by the time I leave, you're going to promise me that you'll tell Dr. Granville the truth. I'm not insane, and you know it. You only said I was to get me out of your life. I'm out of your life now, and I won't ever bother you again. But you must give me my freedom. Please, Cliff. I'll go mad if I stay there."

His sudden burst of laughter chilled her. He said, "Well, you're in the perfect place for it, aren't you!"

She shut her eyes tightly. Even the voices were laughing at that one.

"Very funny," she admitted, opening her eyes again. "But I'm serious. Mother's gone now, and I'm all alone in the world. I just want to be out of there, to—to finish college and—and . . ." She trailed off, fighting the sudden urge to weep.

"And be a novelist," he finished for her. "Yes, I know." He was watching her carefully from the other side of the desk, and his smile had faded. He seemed almost sad. "But you don't seem to understand something, Jessica. The court decided to send you to Northern State Hospital for a reason. A very good reason."

Despite her best efforts at control, the tears were sliding down her cheeks.

"Because you told them to send me there," she whispered, gulping back a sob. The rain beyond the window seemed louder now, and the eyes watching her were all but piercing her hot skin.

Clifton Taggart III slowly shook his head, and he leaned forward across the surface of the desk. "No, Jessica. You were sent there because you're ill. You're very seriously ill. And now, I'm afraid you're going to have to go back there."

In a sudden, swift move, he reached down to the telephone on the desk and lifted the receiver.

"No!" she shouted, and before she knew what she was doing she had pulled the revolver from her coat pocket and aimed it squarely at his heart.

His gasp and the clatter of the receiver as it fell to the desk were nearly drowned out by a deafening clap of thunder, and she screamed. Even her voices screamed. She recovered quickly from the shock and moved carefully around the desk toward him. He took several steps back, away from her. She stopped a few feet

away from him, just beyond his reach, still aiming the gun at him.

"Jessica!" he cried. "For God's sake—"

"Be quiet!" she commanded. "Just listen. I don't want to use this, but I will if I have to. Now, you are going to take paper and a pen from the desk and write a letter to the hospital."

He stood there, frozen, staring incredulously at her, into her eyes.

"You're mad," he croaked. "You really *are* mad!"

Jessica Loman continued to aim the gun at him, and a slow smile came to her lips. Suddenly, it seemed to her that she wasn't afraid anymore. She knew what to do. The voices were telling her what to do.

"I thought you already knew that," she murmured, her smile widening. "Isn't that what you told the court three years ago? I wasn't crazy then, but perhaps. I'm really crazy now. You're so fond of quoting your precious Shakespeare, Cliff. Well, I can quote him, too. 'Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.' You're going to write that letter now, and then I'll leave. I'll go back to the hospital, and you can go back to your pleasant little existence, living off the good graces of your rich wife."

Even with a gun pointed at him, his vanity flared at that.

"I earned everything I have!" he roared, his voice trembling more with indignation than fear.

Her laugh was harsh and cruel; she even surprised herself with the sound. "Dolores is the one with the money, not you!"

"I am America's leading authority on—"

"Yes, yes, I know all about that," she said, cutting him off. She took a step toward him, unaware that she was slowly lowering the gun as she spoke. "And how much do they pay you for your expertise in the works of Shakespeare? What sort of *fortune* have you made from it? Your arcane knowledge may dazzle a few tweedy professors, it might even be useful to a small handful of theatrical producers, but it would hardly keep you in beer and skittles, to say nothing of red satin *smoking jackets*! No, Dolores provides all that for you. You're always taking things from people, Clifton, especially women. Have you ever noticed that? You used me as a temporary distraction, and you use *her* as a checkbook."

"Oh, *please*—" he began, taking a step toward her.

"Stay where you are!" she cried, extending the gun straight out before her again, aimed at his heart.

He froze, watching her.

"We know how you got rid of me," she continued. "The question is, how are you planning to get rid of Dolores when her time comes? When she no longer amuses you, when she's no longer

useful to you. I suppose she'll have the bed next to mine in the nuthouse!"

This last, derisive cry was punctuated by yet another sudden flash of light and a crashing rumble that made her glance over at the big window.

And in that loud, wild moment, he sprang.

She opened her mouth to scream, staring in horror as the man she had once loved came flying through the air toward her, his long arms stretched out before him, reaching for the gun. His fingers had nearly grasped it when she fired.

The gunshot was louder than the thunder, louder than her scream, louder than the screams of all her voices. It filled the room, resounding through her body, ripping through the last gossamer threads that had attached her so tenuously to sanity. Even as it crested, Clifton came crashing into her, sending her flying back across the desk as the gun flew from her hand. He fell with her, and for a long, awful moment he was actually lying on top of her, the heavy weight of him pressed against her in a grim parody of the lovemaking they had once enjoyed, his face between her breasts. Then, as she lay there, screaming, the body of Clifton Taggart III slid slowly down, away from her. He crumpled to the carpet, rolled over onto his back, and lay still.

When she could will herself to move again, she pushed herself awkwardly up from the desk to a standing position, staring down at the body that now lay at her feet. She swayed and nearly fell, but then she shut her eyes and drew in a long, deep breath. In that moment she became aware of the change that had occurred inside her. She was no longer frightened, no longer surprised by what she had just done. Another deep breath. In fact, she was amazed at how calm she felt, how clearheaded. He had attacked her, and she had shot him, and now he was dead. She felt unaccountably good, almost . . . exhilarated. Yes, that was the word. She was actually *happy*.

She prodded him with her bare foot, and then she began to giggle, but she quickly clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. She didn't need the doctors from Northern State Hospital to tell her that this was the first stage of shock. She shook her head to clear it, to rid herself of the voices that continued to whisper and the eyes that continued to watch her.

She was in the act of reaching down in front of the desk to retrieve the fallen gun when she heard the distinct sound above the rain from outside. A car engine. An automobile had pulled into the driveway outside, and now it was approaching the house.

Dolores Taggart, home from her bridge club.

Leaving the gun where it lay on the carpet; she turned her attention to the body sprawled a few feet away. Her mind seemed oddly clear to her: she didn't even have to think about what she was going to do. But she knew she must act quickly and get out of here, back to the hospital. She bent down over him, grabbing him firmly under each arm, and dragged him across the carpet and the wooden floor to the window. She propped the body against the wall there while she raised the lid of the window seat, then she pulled him up and over the side. He was heavy, but she managed to lower his head and torso gently into the seat's interior. Then she picked up his legs and folded them in as well. She straightened up, gazing down at him. He lay there, eyes wide open, and as she stared down she fancied that he grinned up at her and winked. But of course he didn't really do that, she admonished herself. *He's dead.*

Another flash of lightning, another peal of thunder, and through this and the sound of the rain she distinctly heard the sound of a car door slamming. She turned immediately toward the door to the kitchen. She would go out the way she had come in, and then it was a quick run through the fields beside the road, back to the hospital. The rain would drench her, and it was a long way to run, but she felt a sense of energy and purpose that she knew would see her through. She could get past the old man with the newspaper at the security desk—by now he was probably dozing—and she'd be in her bed and asleep before anyone noticed. Yes, she told herself as she ran across the room, *I can do this.*

She was nearly to the door when Mother spoke to her. She heard her mother's voice as clearly as she could hear the incessant rain outside, as clearly as she now heard the sounds of the front door opening and slamming shut when Dolores Taggart entered the house. It was definitely Mother's voice, along with the sibilant whispers of the other voices, but Mother's two words were the words she heard most clearly.

Mother said, "The gun!"

She stopped, staring at the door in front of her, and then she turned around.

The gun!

Yes, there it was, lying in plain sight on the carpet, right in front of the desk. She was across the space in a flash, bending down to scoop up the weapon in one hand and reaching with her other hand for the hem of her nightgown under the black trench coat. She quickly wiped the weapon on the cotton material as best she could, ran around the desk, and replaced it in the drawer. She glanced around the room as she ran back over to the kitchen door.

Yes, everything seemed to be as it had been before she arrived. It might be hours, even days, before Cliff's body was discovered. . . .

She yanked open the door and slipped out of the room just as she heard the light knock on the opposite door and a woman's voice calling, "Cliff? Cliff, darling, I'm home." She reached back to close the kitchen door as the opposite door began to open. Just as she pulled her door silently shut, she heard the voices whispering again. One voice in particular: Mother.

Mother whispered, "The window seat!"

She froze in the darkness outside the room, leaning back against the heavy door through which she'd just made her escape. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to picture the scene inside the room. When she realized, she felt a brief stab of pure panic. Mother was right, of course. She'd left the lid of the window seat wide open, resting against the window.

Even then, in that moment, she didn't despair. The surge of panic immediately evaporated and that odd feeling of confidence came back to her, the same emotion she'd experienced when she looked down and saw her tormentor lying dead at her feet. She stayed there for a moment, silent, leaning back against the door, listening to the sounds from the room beyond it.

In her mind's eye, she saw an elegant, dark-haired woman, about forty, probably wearing fancy evening clothes. She would have removed her raincoat already, and it would be hanging in the front hall closet with her wet umbrella. The woman came into the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Cliff? Darling, are you—"

Silence. Dolores would be looking around the empty room now, wondering why the lights were still on, wondering why the lid to the window seat was . . .

Footsteps. The woman had seen, and she was going over to the window to investigate. She kept her eyes tightly shut, not daring even to breathe, seeing the action unfolding in her mind. The rain continued. The voices were silent now, but the eyes watched intently. From where she was outside the room, she couldn't see the flash of lightning at the window, but she heard the loud thunderclap that followed it. Dolores would be at that window now, leaning over, peering down . . .

The sudden scream from the woman in the study seemed to rock the entire house. She could feel the vibration of it in the wood of the door pressing into her back. She opened her eyes in the darkness now, smiling in triumph. The bloodcurdling shriek was followed almost immediately by another one. And another. The screaming went on and on, drowning out the rain. She listened to

Dolores Taggart's cries, and she began to laugh softly to herself. From somewhere far away, she could hear Mother and all the others applauding her. They approved of what she'd done.

Time to move—the police would be here in a matter of minutes. Now for my getaway, she thought. Still laughing, she stepped forward into the darkness.

She didn't get far.

She'd only taken a couple of steps away from the door when three figures suddenly materialized out of the shadows to stand before her, their bodies forming a solid wall. Two large men dressed in black, and between them a smaller figure, a severe-looking middle-aged woman in a white jacket and skirt, her gray hair pulled back in a tight bun. She froze, staring at them, wondering if they could possibly be real. Was this yet another hallucination?

No. These people were real. They were *very* real. This must be a nurse from Northern State Hospital, she thought, and these men are security guards. They must have been aware of her escape earlier tonight, and they followed her here—which meant they had probably seen what she'd done. The three of them stood there, watching her, barring her escape. She gasped and took a step backward.

"No!" she cried.

The three figures continued to stare silently at her, into her eyes, frowning. She looked wildly about her, finally turning around to face the door through which she'd just come. It was her only possible chance. She threw herself at it, but as she reached down to clutch the knob, the door flew open and two more people came out toward her. The first was an attractive, fortyish woman in a silver lamé evening gown.

The second was the man she'd just killed.

She gasped again and brought her hands up to her mouth, staring at them. As they loomed up before her in the darkness, the bloody ghost of Clifton Taggart III, her dead lover, leaned down and pecked her lightly on the cheek. "You're wonderful, darling!" he whispered in her ear. "I just *love* you!" Then he took his smiling wife's hand and led her off into the shadows.

She watched them floating away from her, thinking, I really am mad, after all! She whirled around again, away from the dreadful vision, and she immediately collided with the middle-aged woman who waited behind her. The nurse from the hospital! She'd forgotten all about her. The two men in black had not moved, either, and all three were watching her intently. Gasping again, she brought her arms up in automatic self-defense. She didn't want to go back to that awful place, and now they'd never let her out. Not *ever*. Oh,

God! she thought. Oh, dear God . . .

"That was great, honey, just great!" the nurse said, grabbing her firmly by the elbow. "But you can drop that Method stuff now. We have to get you changed for the second act!"

She blinked at the woman, focusing on her, and then the words registered. She blinked some more as the real world came rushing in at her. The panic and confusion ebbed away, replaced by a sense of numbness that slowly filled her body. She lowered her arms to her sides, taking in another long, deep breath. After a moment she smiled, and she nodded.

The sound of applause continued in the background, from beyond the fallen curtain. Mother was out there, in the third row, applauding with the others, and all the voices were shouting their approval. Later, at the opening night party, Mother would tell her how marvelous it was.

By Reason of Insanity was going to be a hit.

Still smiling, transforming herself as she moved, she allowed the wardrobe mistress to lead her away, past the two admiring stagehands and up the stairs to her dressing room. 🐦

Note to Our Readers:

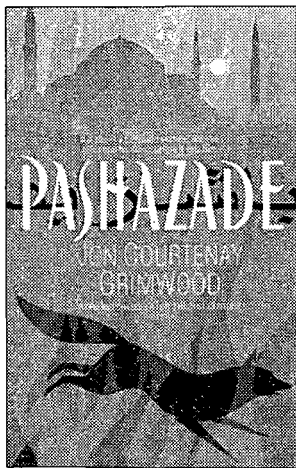
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BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

The age of the World Wide Web is also the age of the World Wide Mystery, as the form has won fans in every corner of the globe. Exquisite mysteries are now being published everywhere, and some are winning wide readership in the United States. For American readers, such books combine the pleasures of detection with the stimulation of armchair travel, and this month we feature three relatively recent imports. Brazilian author Luiz Alfredo Garcia-Roza, Japanese author Miyuki Miyabe, and British author Jon Courtenay Grimwood are among those writers who can offer a glimpse of foreign cultures and exotic locales along with their carefully crafted mysteries.

The first of Jon Courtenay Grimwood's Arabesk series of crime novels, **PASHAZADE: THE FIRST ARABESK**, originally published by Earthlight in the U.K. in 2001, is just now being introduced to American audiences by Bantam Spectra (\$12). It is a brilliant combination of science fiction and mystery. In an alternative future of great subtlety and effectiveness, its hero, Zee Zee, is plucked out of his American prison and transported literally and figuratively into a new role in the African-Mediterranean city of El Iskandryia, an exotic locale he created for the series.



As an inmate of uncertain parentage in a Seattle prison, Zee Zee is a drug courier convicted (falsely) of murder and with certain prospects of becoming a murder victim himself until he is presented with a take-it-or-leave-it escape that starts him on a transforming journey of danger and discovery.

Grimwood, best known perhaps for his science fiction efforts such as *Neo Addix* and *Lucifer's Dragon*, here develops a world politically and religiously transformed by a radically different outcome to the conflicts that led to World War I. In this world Islam is triumphant, and in El Iskandryia, Zee Zee arrives with a diplomatic pass identifying

him as Ashraf Al-Mansur, a pashazade, or son of a pasha, senior grade. In other words, a bey and an important figure in this society.

This new world and Ashraf's place in it are as dangerous as the world he left and he soon finds himself rebelling against the role assigned him, which is typical. He also finds himself once again the primary suspect in a murder he didn't commit—also typical. Atypically, he finds himself responsible for someone else—a precocious young girl who seems as much a pawn as he himself.

Though not developed in great detail, the political realities of this alternative world are vividly sketched and the technological changes are both credible and easily understood. Against that excellent background, Ashraf (or Zee Zee) emerges as a heroic figure learning, adapting, and trying to control his fate where the odds are stacked against him.

Luiz Alfredo Garcia-Roza's fourth Inspector Espinosa mystery set in Rio de Janeiro is *A WINDOW IN COPACABANA* (Holt, \$23). In a police force where corruption is taken for granted, Inspector Espinosa is something of an anomaly. He neither glories in his role of officer of the law, nor uses it to feather his nest. Rather he dreams of the day he can quit the force and use his pension and his large collection of books to open a bookstore.

Meanwhile, he plugs along during a summer season when mostly petty crimes are the norm, until a serial killer begins to strike. A serial killer is always a nightmare, but imagine the consternation when the killer's targets are policemen. Such is the case that lands on Espinosa's plate when three policeman are killed in a short span of time, each shot with the same gun in a very professional manner.

Espinosa forms a small special investigative team that the other police fear almost as much as the unknown killer—or perhaps killers—as Espinosa and his crew begin looking into the lives of the dead policemen and examining the scant forensic evidence.

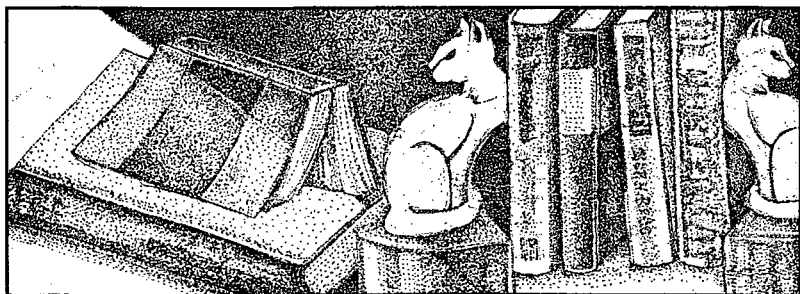
It is the person of Espinosa rather than the crime or its investigation that is both captivating and endearing. He gives serious thought to his meals, to the routes he takes walking to work, to "trivial errands" like buying a new toaster that let him dream of a life beyond that of a policeman. At the same time, Espinosa takes his job very seriously and approaches the task of finding the killer with determination, imagination, and skill. Garcia-Roza's relaxed style blends the sights, sounds, and smells of Rio de Janeiro into every fiber of the story as the number of killings grows and the hunt for the killer grows more intense.

Also, Picador is issuing the first three mysteries in the Inspector Espinosa series, *The Silence of the Rain*, *December Heat*, and *Southwesterly Wind*, in handsome trade paperback editions.

Miyuki Miyabe is a best-selling author in Japan, and a prolific one as well with more than thirty-five full-length novels to her credit since her debut in 1992. Her first novel, *All She Was Worth* (published in English by Kodansha International in 1996), won both Best Mystery Novel and Best Novel of the Year in Japan. *SHADOW FAMILY* (Kodansha, \$22.95) is only her second mystery to be published in English, but if others are as skillfully executed more should certainly follow.

In *Shadow Family* two separate murders are obviously connected—that of Tokyo businessman Ryosuke Tokoroda and that of his former lover, a young woman named Naoko Imai. So though the murders took place in different squad districts, the investigations are merged into one. As a team of detectives comes together to probe the exact relationship between the two victims, they discover that Tokoroda had two families—the wife and daughter he lived with and a fantasy family consisting of a wife, son, and daughter on the Internet, a “shadow family.”

Lacking forensic evidence sufficient to identify a suspect explicitly, the police team employ an unusual stratagem to bring the murderer to justice. With Tokoroda’s daughter observing through a one-way mirror, the various members of Tokoroda’s “shadow family” are brought into the interview room and subjected to questioning. The result is a psychological drama of the first order as the workings of the real family and the fantasy family unfold in often painful fashion and physical evidence assumes secondary importance to emotional truths.



DEATH OF AN AZTEC PRINCESS

MARTIN LIMÓN

A cold wind swept in from the Pacific, slapping raindrops around like a drunk battering his wife. At El Cinco de Mayo Park, an ambulance straddled the curb and paramedics bustled about, snapping on longsleeved plastic gloves. Beneath shimmering street lamps, a gathering crowd of civilians was being held back by policemen behind a string of taut yellow tape.

My name is Gonzo Gonzales, private heat. I do security work and car repossessions mostly, earning my daily *masa* by venturing into neighborhoods where gringos fear to tread. I work the area of town which includes the districts known collectively as East L.A. An area which—outside of Mexico City—is the most heavily populated Mexican barrio in the world.

When the police were otherwise occupied, I ducked beneath the thin barrier and sloshed unnoticed through the mud into the heavily forested center of the park.

Cold blobs of rainwater whizzed past the brim of my fedora and splattered my cheeks. My work may not pay much but I earn enough to afford a coat and a tie and a freshly pressed white shirt to wear to work every day. I refuse to dress like a peasant, even though nowadays millionaires and movie stars dress as if they're twenty pesos away from their last bowl of *frijoles refritos*. I wiped away the droplets, pulled up the collar of my trench coat, and kept sloshing forward through the mud.

Twenty minutes ago, I'd received a phone call at Flaco's Bar and Grill in East L.A. The time was ten P.M. The caller was Esmeralda Peña, a cousin of mine, a woman I'd grown up with and a woman who'd been like a sister to me. Ezzy was frantic. Her daughter hadn't come home and Ezzy had been sitting by the phone for three hours. Waiting. Juanita had been working after school, Ezzy told me, at some sort of *folklorico* dance troupe. Even in her nearly hysterical state, Ezzy couldn't help bragging about Juanita.

"She's doing the choreography herself."

Juanita was a good student—straight As—and Ezzy wasn't bashful about flashing Juanita's report card. College scholarships had already been offered during this, Juanita's senior year at Lincoln High School. Rehearsals for the dance troupe were held at El Teatro Azteca, a church-sponsored project for underprivileged youth that sits in the center of El Cinco de Mayo Park, just a few blocks from Flaco's Bar and Grill.

I told Ezzy to calm down, it was probably nothing.

"But she never does this," Ezzy told me. "She always calls."

"Maybe the rain's holding her up."

"Gonzo, by your mother's sainted grave, are you going to help me or not?"

That was Ezzy. Get right to the point. And she wasn't above using guilt trips.

"Of course, *corazón*," I said. "*¿Cómo no?*" How not?

"Now, Gonzo," Ezzy said.

"Now," I agreed.

She thanked me and made me swear that I'd call her as soon as I knew something. I promised I would.

About thirty yards inside the park, another yellow tape had been looped around the trunks of palm trees. An arroyo as wide as a delivery truck, secluded by heavy shrubbery and hanging leaves, led down to a cement drainage ditch gurgling with runoff. For the moment, the rain had stopped. Blue-smocked technicians crammed the area and someone had set up flood lamps so the entire scene had the eerie quality of a carnival blanketed in fog.

A voice bellowed behind me. "Freeze!"

I turned and gazed into the barrel of a .45 hovering between clenched fingers. Staring at the pitiless black pit of the gun, I attempted a smile. I raised both my hands above my head, keeping my eyes on the .45 as it lowered. Behind the gun was a familiar face.

Black curly hair streaked with gray, a nose that would've been straight if it hadn't been broken a couple of times, a sad mouth, and brown eyes that looked as if they'd been tired since the day the world was created. Pale complexion. His thin body stood ramrod straight, so straight that he appeared to be bending backwards.

Lieutenant Ruben Portillo, LAPD. A stalwart on the force. A legend in the barrio. The first amongst us ever to make good in the Machiavellian bureaucracy of the Los Angeles Police Department.

"Gonzo?" Portillo asked. "What are you doing here?"

He recognized me because of the time I'd spent on the force, a few years ago.

I lowered my hands and straightened my soggy coat. The rain

had slowed now but still fell in fat drops. Drooping palm leaves reached out for us, like the fingers of giant carnivorous plants.

Portillo holstered his gun. "I'm busy, Gonzo. Talk to me."

I explained what I was doing here, speaking in rapid Spanish. I'm not sure why. English comes more naturally to me. Maybe I was afraid other cops would be listening. Maybe I was afraid that speaking my fears in English would make them more official. More real.

As I spoke, Portillo nodded his head slowly. He had a way about him. A way of listening that made you feel that he was doing more than just listening. He was absorbing you—everything about you. Absorbing your pain and your fears and your uncertainties, making them his. That's why, maybe, he looked so sad. And that's why he was such a good cop. Even criminals spilled their guts to him.

Listening to my story, Portillo seemed to grow tired. Exhausted, really. As if he'd just been to hell, tarried a while, and then clawed his way back to the land of the living.

"You've been drinking again, haven't you, Gonzo?" he asked.

I nodded my head.

"Good," he said. "Maybe it will help."

Then he motioned with his open palm toward the gurgling gully and the glare of the floodlights.

"This way, Señor Gonzales."

I shaded my eyes from the light of the hot bulbs. Lieutenant Portillo and I stood on the edge of the arroyo leading into the storm drain. The mouth of the cement-reinforced flood tunnel was covered by sturdy steel bars, a couple of them sawed through and bent, making an opening big enough for a kid to squeeze through.

Drug dealers. When cops cruise the park, young boys are paid to haul the valuable packets of heroin or cocaine or designer drugs down into the drainage tunnel. I'd been in them before—years ago when I was too young to know better, when I thought entering them was adventurous and fun. Foul places. Full of dead cats and rotted dogs and squeaking vermin.

No cop in his right mind would follow a kid down there. Not even for a drug bust.

I was stalling. Letting my thoughts be drawn to something other than the central focus of everyone's attention. Whatever they were interested in, it lay beneath a clump of thick shrubs. One of the technicians methodically tied the shrub branches back with electrical wire, clearing a space so the other technicians could work. Men in blue smocks and plastic gloves and face masks used

large tweezers to pick objects off the ground and drop them into numbered plastic bags. Another technician held a clipboard and marked things down as his coworkers mumbled.

The only thing I saw was a pair of feet.

They were small and well formed with flecks of pink polish smeared on the toenails. What was strange about the feet was the string of bells. Tiny spherical bells, made of copper or tin, looped around one ankle by three strands of red-, white-, and green-colored twine.

I had already told Lieutenant Portillo that I was worried this victim might be my niece. In Anglo custom, my cousin's daughter would be considered my second cousin. That seems cold to us Chicanos. Our cousins are like our brothers and sisters and their children are like our nieces or nephews. But since my mother died, I'd been practically adopted by Ezzy and her mother. I'd been present at every stage in the life of Juanita Maria Silva. At her birth, at her baptism, at her Communion, at every one of her birthday celebrations. So I called Juanita *mi hija*, my daughter. Portillo, being a Chicano, accepted the convoluted reference without comment.

I squatted on my haunches and squinted into the glare of the floodlights.

Portillo tapped me on the shoulder.

"What do you think, Gonzo?"

"Too many technicians in the way. And the shrubs."

"We'll move them."

He gave orders for the technicians to back off. Still, I couldn't see clearly. The man who had wired the shrub branches jerked on his bundle of wires until the entire shrub rose to its full height and then bent over backward like a circus contortionist.

Now I could see the body.

She was a young woman, in her late teens, on her way to full adulthood, but she looked small and helpless lying there on her back in the cold mud.

The outfit she wore was bizarre. Full of ropes and tassels and a short deerskin skirt and a beaded breastplate made of a thousand interwoven colors. I realized that the design of the beads was the sun rising. Triumphant. Her hair was long and black and although matted and glued into clumps by the mud, still straighter than I remembered it; as if she'd paid for a special hairstyle for this occasion. Crumpled beneath her hair was the broken quill of a purple plume. I recognized it. The quetzal bird. Sacred to the ancient Mexicans.

Was it real? Couldn't be. Must be a cheap reproduction.

Then I realized what the getup was all about. The *folklorico* dance troupe. She was dressed up like an Aztec princess.

Her face was grimaced in pain, distorting her unblemished features. Her teeth were straight and pearly white, but it appeared that her molars had been ground so hard that I half expected to see enamel dust dribbling down the side of her cheek.

Around her neck was a straight rope, of the type you can buy in any hardware store. Except it was cut to about a three-foot length and wooden handles had been knotted into the ends and the entire contraption had been skillfully looped over the head and around the neck of this unmoving Aztec princess. Her throat was lined with rope burns. One on top of the other, each one growing progressively more red and raw until the final one lay right beneath her jawbone. Vertical lines scarred the rope burns, creating a tic-tac-toe effect. So she had fought. She had pulled on the rope. Scratching off lines of her own flesh in her frenzy to breathe.

Her hands hovered on either side of her jaw, the fingers bent like the talons of a hawk ready to grab a hare.

The eyes were shut. Maybe one of the technicians had closed the lids. I was thankful for that. She couldn't witness all of us crude men hovering above her defenseless corpse.

There was a long silence. The technicians didn't move. Neither did Portillo. From the other side of El Cinco de Mayo Park, an occasional hoot of derision from the crowd of gawkers drifted across the wide expanse of lawn.

I thought of the Juanita I had known.

An enchanting young woman. Stunning, actually. Taller than most Chicanas, with lush black hair that rose from her high forehead and then fell back to just below her shoulders. Her face was oval shaped. Regal. The nose was slightly pointed and the eyes gleaming black and full of evaluative fury. The role of an Aztec princess would come naturally to her. She could do anything and be anything. She had the brains, she had the beauty, she had the drive. And she was using those gifts. She was acting as most adults wished they had acted in high school. With purpose. With the full knowledge that a free education is the greatest gift our society bestows.

The thought that Juanita was now gone was more than upsetting, it was maddening. I tried to push the rage out of my mind. I had to regain my balance. I needed to concentrate only on what was before me and be professional. I needed to absorb every detail of the murder scene and keep those details locked in my memory so that one day I could stand before the man who'd murdered Juanita Maria Silva and look him in the eye and watch him squirm before I reached out and strangled him with my bare hands.

Gently, Portillo tapped his long fingers on my shoulder.

"Gonzo?"

I looked up.

"Do you recognize her, Gonzo?"

His voice seemed far away. With an effort, I pulled myself back to the living.

"Yes," I said. "Her name is Juana Maria Silva. Juanita, we called her, since she was a baby."

"Your niece?"

I stood up, looked at Portillo, and nodded.

He closed his heavily lidded eyes for a moment.

"*Lo siento*," he said finally. I'm sorry.

For two days, our misery had been complete.

Now, on the morning after a sleepless night, Esmeralda Peña sat in her front room on the plush red couch embroidered with lavender orchids. She neither looked up nor spoke as I approached. I slid in beside her and took her hands in mine. They were cold. Bonier than I remembered. Ezzy jerked them away.

Finally, Ezzy spoke. "Lieutenant Portillo says Juanita was killed by Henry Carranza."

"I know," I said, as gently as I could.

"I don't believe it."

I patted her hand. "Portillo's a good cop."

"Maybe," she answered. "But this time he's wrong."

I didn't respond and Ezzy seemed too exhausted to argue. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "There's a pot of *albóndigas* in the kitchen." Her voice was dry. "You'll have to heat the corn tortillas yourself."

Suddenly I realized that for the first time in two days I was hungry. I rose from the couch, entered the kitchen, and turned on a small gas flame beneath the pot of meatball soup. I also turned on another low flame beneath a flat metal pan, flopped two tortillas atop it, and stood watching steam slowly begin to rise off the surface of the soup.

While the *albóndigas* simmered, I went to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror, studying the red-veined eyes. The scene of Juanita lying dead in that muddy ditch flashed into my mind, but somehow I managed to fend off the memory. On the way back, I stopped in front of Juanita's room. Without thinking, I reached in and switched on the light. Maybe it was a former cop's instinct, but almost involuntarily I found myself taking inventory.

One bed, covered by a hand-woven Indian blanket. Posters of

Latino rock stars, books on physics and chemistry, a glowing green portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe. And there, covering one entire wall of Juanita's room, a giant, full-color photograph of the Aztec Calendar Stone.

I made my search as methodical as I could, starting on the north wall of Juanita's room and working my way counterclockwise, rummaging through drawers, thumbing through magazines. As I worked, I saw evidence that someone had been here before me. When I finished a complete circuit, I searched under the mattress and under the bed.

Nothing.

The closet was a little more of a challenge. Rollerblades, an old lacrosse stick, a photo album of a trip Juanita had taken to visit some relatives in Culiacán, in the Mexican state of Sinaloa. It was in the toe of an old hiking boot that I found it.

Money.

A roll of twenties, tens, and fives. Tightly bound by a rubber band. And a small notebook. Pocket size. The kind a traveling salesman would use to keep track of expenses. Rows of numbers, letters, more numbers. Nothing that made sense.

Quickly, I counted the money. Over five hundred bucks.

Juanita didn't have a job—she was too devoted to her studies and to her extracurricular activities to worry about money—and therefore, she had no legal way of amassing this small fortune in old bills. Where had it come from? For the moment, the money would be safe here. I stuffed it back in the toe of the boot. The notebook, I kept.

Smoke from burnt corn invaded my nostrils. I ran back to Ezzy's kitchen.

The *albóndigas* was boiling over and my two corn tortillas were smoking. Without singeing my fingers, I managed to pull the hot corn wafers off the red pan and toss them into the sink where I ran cold water over them. Then I switched off all fires and watched as the bubbles subsided in the red soup.

What the hell. I wasn't hungry anyway.

Ezzy didn't stir when I sat back down next to her. Silence filled the room. Finally, she said, "Did you eat?"

I told her I had.

"Good." Then she sat up straight on the couch, thrusting her hair back, her eyes moist and sober. She stared directly at me.

"Ask me the questions, Gonzo."

"The questions? What do you mean, Ezzy?"

"The questions. You know, like on TV. When the innocent young girl's been murdered and the detective wants to find out who did it."

With that, her face crinkled and almost broke again. Somehow, she managed to regain her composure. I still wasn't sure exactly what she meant, so I asked.

"You mean the questions like Lieutenant Portillo asked you?"

She nodded. "Like that."

"They're painful, Ezzy. Are you sure you want to go through them again?"

"Yes. I want to be certain to tell everything. Not to leave anything out. Not to forget some important fact that could lead to the *cabrón* who killed Juanita."

I studied her. She was serious. Very serious.

"You let Portillo search Juanita's room?"

She nodded. "He told me it might help."

I stared into Ezzy's eyes. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm sure. You were a cop once, Gonzo. Go ahead. Ask."

I started with the routine list. Who were Juanita's friends? Who were her enemies? Who would've wanted to kill her?

Ezzy answered like all mothers do. Juanita had a lot of friends, no enemies, and no one would've wanted to kill her.

I kept probing.

Juanita was a cheerleader at school and on the honor roll and a member of the student government. Certainly any underachiever, which included most of the kids at Lincoln High, would've resented Juanita's accomplishments. Some of them might've even wanted to use violence.

Ezzy flatly denied this. "Everybody loved her," she claimed.

I sighed. Still, I kept asking questions about Juanita's personal life and Ezzy finally rebelled.

"What's the point of all this, Gonzo?"

"The more a detective knows about Juanita, the more likely he is to capture her killer."

"But why would her life have anything to do with it? She was killed by a maniac, wasn't she? Dragged out in the park behind bushes." Ezzy's trembling hand reached to cover her eyes and once again she started to cry. Her voice rose to an hysterical pitch. "A sex maniac."

I pulled her hands away and wiped her eyes with the back of my knuckles.

"No, Ezzy. Couldn't be."

"Why not?"

"Juanita wasn't raped."

"You're sure?"

"The cops are sure. Didn't Portillo tell you?"

"Maybe he did. I was so upset."

Before I left El Cinco de Mayo Park, Lieutenant Portillo had filled me in on what he'd known so far. Which wasn't much. The autopsy report would make the final conclusion, but their preliminary investigation had excluded any sexual activity on Juanita's part prior to her death.

Esmeralda stared at a dust mote floating near the roof. For a moment, I thought she'd left me. Then her lips moved.

"You found the money?" Ezzy asked.

I nodded.

"So did Lieutenant Portillo. He asked me where it had come from."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him I didn't know." She sighed. "But he assumed the worst."

"Which was?"

"That she was taking money from Henry Carranza. Drug money. Maybe involved in some way."

Henry was well known in the barrio. The leader of Los Diablitos—also known as "Los D's"—a gang of punks who hang out near El Cinco de Mayo Park.

I waited, afraid to ask Ezzy if that was true. Suddenly, Ezzy realized that my silence meant that I was asking the question. She turned to me, eyes afire. "You can believe that Juanita was taking drug money? She wasn't. No way."

I spread my fingers. "Sorry, Ezzy." I pulled out the ledger I'd found in Juanita's room and handed it to Ezzy.

Listlessly, she thumbed through it.

"Do you have any idea what those entries mean?" I asked.

She handed the ledger back to me. "None whatsoever."

"What did Henry Carranza have to do with Juanita?" I asked.

"Her boyfriend," Ezzy said matter of factly. "He was like a puppy dog around Juanita. She owned him. But he was too short. So who needs him?"

"But Henry's a member of Los D's. And Juanita was a good girl."

Ezzy groaned. "Please, Gonzo."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean good girls like to have fun too."

"With a gangbanger?"

"Have you seen any of the guys in the Chess Club lately? Juanita settled for what was available."

"But she brushed him off?"

"Like a flea."

"So that must've embarrassed him. Made him look bad with his homeboys."

"Juanita never made anybody look bad. Just the fact that he dated

her gave a runt like Henry Carranza more status than he deserved." Ezzy stared back into space. "Henry idolized Juanita. Always said he wished he could be as smart as her. He was proud that she would leave the barrio some day and he had dated her. He wasn't trying to hold her back. If you ask me, he was afraid of her."

"Afraid?"

"Sure. Afraid of her brains. Afraid of the spotlight that shone on her wherever she went. *Vatos* hate the spotlight. Unless it's in their own neighborhood."

"Ezzy," I said, as gently as I could. "Boyfriends, even puppy dog boyfriends, kill their girlfriends every day."

Ezzy thought about this for a moment, then spoke resolutely. "No. Whoever killed Juanita didn't know her. They couldn't have. Everyone who knew her, loved her."

I wasn't going to argue with a bereaved mother. But every cop knows that if you find a lover, you find a potential murderer.

"Lieutenant Portillo has been assigned to the case, Ezzy," I said. "He's a good cop. One of the best. He'll figure out who murdered Juanita."

"No. That's not good enough. Besides, I don't trust him."

"I thought you said you wanted to cooperate with the police."

"I do. But now you've made me realize that they'll treat Juanita like just another problem on a very long list of problems."

Mistrust of the police runs deep in East L.A. Ezzy wasn't immune to it and I didn't want to add to her burden of worry. Better to reassure her. Make her believe that on a murder investigation the LAPD would do its best, no matter who the victim might be.

"Let's not jump to conclusions," I told Ezzy. "Give the cops a chance."

Ezzy leaned forward and grabbed my hands. "No. They don't know Juanita. They don't know anything about her. I want you to find out who murdered her, Gonzo. Not the LAPD. *You*." Ezzy squeezed my hands tighter. "You can find the person who did this. I know you can. You *must*."

My first stop: Hollenbeck.

In school, the Anglo teachers taught us about the French Revolution and the freeing of the prisoners from the Bastille. I always pictured the Bastille as looking exactly like the LAPD's Hollenbeck Division. Big cement walls three stories tall, barbed wire security fences, armed guards at the front door, and dungeons down below.

At the front door, I flashed my driver's license. The grayhaired

security guard wrote my name in a wrinkled ledger and I stepped through the metal detectors.

The steps to the basement were constructed in the old style. Made of brick, sturdy wooden handrails, broad enough for three cops to walk abreast. As I descended past the first landing, a line of *vatos* were being hustled down a long corridor by an armed squad of uniformed cops. The homeboys were shackled at their wrists and at their ankles, chained like a human train, one to the other. Despite their humiliating circumstances, each of the homeboys held his clenched fists straight out in front of his waist, as far as his chains would allow, and strutted down the hallway, like Mayan princes on their way to a king's throne room.

To *vatos*, Anglo chains are a badge of honor.

I continued down to Basement Three.

I wound my way past three or four plainclothes cops sitting at their desks, drinking coffee, chatting on the phone. A plywood cubicle against the back wall was painted sky blue and held three large sheets of smoke-stained glass. Lieutenant Portillo acted as if he'd been expecting me. He opened the door and motioned for me to sit on one of the folding metal chairs. Then he sat down behind his desk.

"What've you got on Henry Carranza?" I asked.

Portillo stared at me for a long time and then shrugged. "I didn't arrest him."

"Who did?"

"The Gang Unit."

Of course. The members of the Gang Unit were the bold ones in the LAPD, the unstoppable force. The ones who acted first and thought about it later. That's why Henry Carranza had been arrested so quickly.

"What was the probable cause?"

Portillo laced his long fingers together. "When a girlfriend is murdered, it's probable that her boyfriend is the one who did it."

"In other words, they didn't have anything."

"What are you, a defense attorney? I thought you'd be on our side on this one. The Gang Unit questioned the suspect, asked him what his alibi was for that night, and when he didn't have one, they slapped the cuffs on him. Meanwhile, they dug up a witness. A witness who put Henry Carranza there, in El Cinco de Mayo Park at the time of the killing."

"Who?"

Portillo unlaced his fingers and fiddled with a paperweight on his desk. It was a stainless steel replica of a Spanish conquistador on horseback. "Some *cholo*. One of the punks who hangs out near the

park. They call him Chuy the Squirrel. Leo Barreras is his real name."

"A drug dealer?"

Portillo shrugged again.

"Is that going to stick?"

He gazed at the plasterboard wall, as if longing for it to have a window with a view. Any view.

"Henry Carranza and Juanita Silva had just broken up," he said. "Henry was spotted at El Cinco de Mayo Park at the time of the murder. The witness has already made a statement to that effect. When we searched Henry's car we found a ring in the glove compartment. A ring that had once been worn by your niece, Juanita Silva. As far as her mother knows, Juanita never returned the ring to Henry. That means he stole it from her."

Portillo started counting things off with his long fingers.

"Henry Carranza had the means, he had the motive, and he had the opportunity to murder your niece. That, coupled with the lack of a convincing alibi, resulted in the arrest. Guilt or innocence will be decided by a jury."

"What do you think?"

Portillo sighed again. "Look, Gonzo, the only reason I'm telling you all this is because you're a member of the victim's family. If you're planning on interfering with an official homicide investigation or mouthing off to the newspapers, you can forget about further cooperation from me."

"Ezzy and I just want to make sure that the right man is punished."

"Who else could it be?" Portillo asked. "Mothers never believe that the boys their daughters admire are capable of being so cruel. You were a cop. You know better. You know how violent a jealous man can be."

"But Juanita didn't have another lover."

"You know this?"

"I believe it."

Portillo's heavy eyelids seemed to droop even lower.

"A man can be jealous of something other than a rival," he said.

"He can be jealous of a woman having a future. He can be jealous of her having hope."

"Can I see the lab reports?" I asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not a cop anymore."

I stood to leave.

"Gonzo," Portillo said. I stopped and looked back at him. "Don't, for your own sake, mess with the Gang Unit."

"Why not?"

He spread his long fingers. "They're hot blooded in the Gang Unit. They do things they regret later. Don't let one of those regrets be you."

What I like about downtown L.A. is that when you enter the city you feel for a moment as if you're entering Old Spain. First, you cruise past the Union Station with its thick adobe walls and red tile roof, and then Olvera Street, with its lush fountains and the plaza dedicated to Mexican restaurants and cantinas and curio shops. Finally, you reach the downtown area itself, with its palm trees and splashes of greenery interspersed strategically so the men loitering in hope of employment don't congregate in one area.

But the illusion is shattered if you allow yourself to notice the car-jammed intersections or the grating roar of combustion engines atop the Harbor Freeway.

Still, I love it down here—the open-fronted discount stores, the street hustlers barking through megaphones, the sleazy bars open at all hours. And always a nearby stand where you can purchase *carnitas* wrapped in a warm corn tortilla or a plastic bowl filled with *chili colorado* laced with pinto beans. There's a bustle to the city. A sense of purpose.

Los Angeles. The City of the Angels. In Spanish, *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles*. The Village of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels.

Only Anglos have the gall to shorten all that to "L.A."

Shackles clanked as Henry Carranza shuffled toward the thick glass partition that separated us. He wore the loose, bright orange tunic and pantaloons of the high security prisoner. Before he sat down, he paused, staring at me. Surprised. He hesitated, working it out, figuring that I must've faked my way in here. Then he thought it over some more, as if deciding whether or not to waste his time. His lip curled. One stray tuft of straight black hair fell over a smooth forehead.

The big guard shoved him toward the chair.

Henry didn't react. He just kept staring at me as if the roughness of the guard was of no concern to him whatsoever. The guard shoved him again and this time Henry Carranza made his decision. He strode forward and plopped down in the plastic chair. When the guard left, Henry lifted the black phone to his ear.

"They told me someone named Vicente Fox was here to see me."

"Sorry, he couldn't make it."

Neither Henry nor the Anglo guards who logged me in had

realized that Vicente Fox was the President of Mexico.

"What you got? Phony ID?"

"A green card."

Henry was being held temporarily on possession of illegal substances. That's why the guy I knew at the front desk had allowed me to see him. The murder one charges were not yet official. That and the fifty dollar bill I slipped him.

The young Henry Carranza leaned back in his chair and studied me carefully. "You're related to Juanita."

"Her *tío*," I said.

"I seen you around, man. An old booze hound."

I tried not to squirm, but I did anyway.

"At least it's legal," I said.

"But drugs don't put the weight on you like *la cerveza*."

I glanced down at my waistline. Not bad. Not like it was a few years ago, but not bad nevertheless. The kid had me on the defensive. He was rail thin himself. Short but darkly handsome. With forearms and shoulders that bulged as if he worked out in gymnastics.

"They say you killed Juanita."

"They say a lot of shit, man."

"They have a witness who puts you at the park at the time of the murder."

"Lies."

"Where were you?"

"Kicking back with my homeboys."

"They'll testify to that?"

"Sure. If anybody'll let them."

Corroboration by gangbangers wasn't exactly like having the word of a Catholic cardinal.

"So who killed her?"

"When I find out," Henry said, "I'll kill him myself."

He rocked back in his chair and continued to stare at me. I kept my face stern and my eyes focused on a point between his eyes.

"Who's their witness?"

Henry shrugged. "Somebody who wants to take me down."

"There a lot of those people?"

"Sure. A lot of money can be made at El Cinco."

"And with you gone, Los D's might not be able to hold their turf."

"They'll hold it." But his face darkened, as if a rain cloud had drifted in from the sea.

"You're not sure."

"I'm sure," he snapped. He leaned forward in his chair. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm going to find out who murdered Juanita."

"Why you? Why not the cops?"

"Because I'm good at digging up the truth."

Henry rolled his eyes. "You don't really believe that the *truth* will come out, do you? *La verdad*? In East L.A.?"

Instead of answering, I let him continue.

"The Gang Unit took me off the street. That's what they wanted."

"Maybe."

"No *maybe* about it. As long as they keep busting *vatos*, they keep getting promotions. I'll be rotting in prison and some Gang Unit *cabron* will be *el jefe*, the chief of the entire effing police department."

I studied him. That was a long speech for Henry Carranza. He straightened his orange tunic and leaned back once again in his chair.

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe everything will happen just like you say. Or maybe we can change it." Henry waited. "If I find out who really killed Juanita."

His shoulders slumped and he lowered his head. The long black strands of his forelock hung loosely.

"Yeah, man. I'm sorry someone did that to her. Really sorry."

Maybe this was an act. If so, Henry Carranza was a talented actor. Most cons are.

"Who would've done it, Henry?"

"I wish I knew. Everyone loved her, you know?"

"People tell me that you were going out with her and then she dumped you."

He looked into my eyes. "Yeah. We were going out. We were close. Real close. She used to tell me shit that I never dreamed about. About chemistry and physics and stuff like that. About mathematics and about how our ancestors used to be geniuses at it until all us dumb Chicanos forgot how to do it. She blamed the Spanish, said they raped and pillaged our civilization. And then the Anglos, who stole half of Mexico and now act as if we're not supposed to be here. Treat us like strangers. Foreigners in a land that our ancestors occupied for thousands of years. She was into that stuff. You know, Chicano pride and all that. I respected her for it but I couldn't figure where she was going with it. You know, how it would pay off. But I knew she did. She had it figured out. That's what I liked about her, man, she had it all figured out."

Henry Carranza leaned forward in his chair. His chains rattled.

"When she 'dumped' me, we had a long talk. She told me about all her plans and how she needed to go away to college and how being married or anything like that would make it impossible.

Maybe you don't believe this because you're her *tío* and all, but I agreed with her. I know who I am. I'm boss *jefe* in my own neighborhood, man. But I couldn't keep up with Juanita. Nobody could. Nobody I know anyway. So I let her go. I told all my homeboys that I was letting her go. No hard feelings. And I put out orders that none of the local Chicanos could touch her. No way. Not while I was around. I was going to let her leave the barrio without me. I wasn't going to hurt her. I wasn't going to stand in her way." Then he paused and took a deep breath. "And I didn't kill her."

A long silence grew between us. I let it. Then I said, "Sounds good, Henry. But if you did kill Juanita, you'd say all that shit anyway."

Once again he leaned back in his chair, rearranging the hard lines on his face.

"There you are, man. They got me. Whatever I say don't mean nothing."

"They found Juanita's ring in your car."

"In the glove compartment," Henry answered easily. "Where I put it when she gave it back to me."

"Why'd you leave it there?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I wanted it nearby. You know, handy. In case she changed her mind."

"Somebody," I said, "must've had a reason to kill her. What about other boys at school? Somebody who was jealous."

"You'll have to ask somebody else about that. I finished with *la escuela* after the eighth grade."

"At El Cinco de Mayo Park, who should I talk to? Who knows what goes on there?"

Without hesitation, Henry answered: "*La ardilla*. Chuy the Squirrel. They call him that because he's at the park so much. Some guys say he stores nuts."

Chuy the Squirrel, a k a Leo Barreras. The same person who, according to Lieutenant Portillo, had spotted Henry in El Cinco de Mayo Park on the night of the murder.

"This guy works for you?"

"On a contract basis."

"He also works for other gangs?"

Henry nodded. "It's good sometimes to have somebody who can move back and forth between us."

I had one more question, a question I'd been mulling over since I'd left Ezzy's house and I wanted to hit Henry with it right between the eyes.

"I found the money."

His jaw muscles tightened.

"And I found the ledger Juanita was keeping. She was a smart girl, she knew about money, she knew how to handle business. That's what brought you two together, isn't it Henry?"

I was winging it here, but when Henry didn't contradict me, I kept going.

"You've been in charge of Los Diablitos for at least two years, Henry. You must've pulled down a nice piece of change selling drugs at the park and yet you still have to use a public defender. What gives, Henry? How was Juanita tied up in all this?"

I stared at Henry and he stared back. The *vato* challenge. The standoff that can result in death if one of the combatants doesn't back down. But I wasn't backing down. Not with Juanita lying cold and naked on some mortician's pallet.

I wanted to reach through the bulletproof partition and grab little Henry Carranza by his well-muscled neck. I wanted to wring the truth out of him. Somehow, he murdered my niece. Maybe it hadn't been him who strangled her, maybe she had died at the hands of another criminal, but he was responsible nevertheless. Somehow, he enticed her into something that was more dangerous than she imagined.

"Talk to me, Henry," I said.

"I have nothing to say."

"You're frightened now, Henry. I'm close to the truth. Maybe you're frightened of the guy who murdered Juanita. But think about this for a minute, Henry." I leaned closer, until puffs of fog appeared on the glass between us. "If you don't help me find out who did this, and if you don't start helping me now, you're going to have to start being frightened of *me*."

I spent the rest of the morning rousting some of the drug runners at El Cinco de Mayo Park. I finally convinced one of them to tell me what he knew about the whereabouts of Chuy the Squirrel. All he knew was that Chuy's mother worked at a *tortilleria* off Whittier Boulevard. Which one, he wasn't sure.

After wearing out some serious shoe leather, I found a place with a hand-painted blue and gold sign above the shop that said, LA TORTILLERIA INTERNACIONAL.

As I entered, a bell tinkled above the door. One long glass cooler held many types of *queso*, string cheeses imported from Mexico. Another held the pink and green sugary confections known as *pan dulce*, sweet bread. In the work area in the back, rotund women surrounded a wood burning stove, patting *masa* back and forth between their palms. When the discs were flat enough, they slapped them atop the heated stone surface. The air was filled

with the pungent aroma of hot chili peppers and roasting corn.

A young woman with huge brown eyes and a bright red ribbon tied in her black hair stared at me from behind an ancient cash register.

"¿Señora Barreras está aquí?" I asked. Is Mrs. Barreras here?

One of the women preparing tortillas froze in mid pat.

Bingo. The big-eyed girl turned and stared at her. Another woman, one of the round ones standing near the stove, held her hand up to her mouth and said, "Aaei."

Apparently, despite their establishment's grandiose name, the employees at La Tortilleria Internacional weren't used to a lot of visitors. Especially grown men in suits asking for a woman whose only claim to fame was that she could stand over a hot stove, hour after hour, patting out corn tortillas.

"Señora Barreras," I said, addressing the woman who had frozen.

"Sí," she answered warily.

"Your son." I spoke to her in Spanish. "I wish to speak to him."

She was a round woman, almost as round as the wood-burning stove she toiled in front of. Her face was brown and wrinkled with worry. Long black pigtails, streaked with gray, fell down the sides of her head to her shoulders.

She handed the uncooked *masa* to the woman across from her. Then she wiped her hands on her white apron, shook her head negatively, and started to say something. I interrupted her.

"It's about the payment. We weren't sure if we should mail a check directly to Leo so I've brought it over. Of course, I'll need him to sign a receipt."

In their confusion, the women glanced at one another. "*Un recibo*," the one by the stove said, as if in awe.

I pulled out my worn notebook, hoping it looked enough like a receipt book to fool these women at least for a moment.

"It's not that much money," I told Mrs. Barreras. "Only fifty dollars. Still, don't you think Leo could use it?"

"*Cincuenta dolares*," the same awestruck woman said.

The woman I assumed to be Leo Barreras's mother looked confused and then seemed to make a decision. She said, "¿Cómo no?"

Leo, she told me, was working at a garage not far from here and she would be happy to give the check to him. I thanked her for her consideration but told her that my boss insisted that I hand the check to Leo personally and insure that he sign a receipt. I tapped my notebook.

She nodded and assured me that she understood my dilemma.

Mexicans, before they're spoiled by life in the States, revel in exaggerated politeness. Even when they'd like nothing better than

to cut your liver out, they'll smile and use fancy phrases and show their fellow human beings every verbal consideration. Of course, it's a show. But it's a pleasant show. I wished more Americans used it, instead of trying to impress one another with the extent of their four-letter-word vocabularies.

Señora Barreras waddled over to the counter. When the big-eyed girl behind the register offered her a paper and pencil, she stared at the writing implements as if they were radioactive. So as not to embarrass her, I grabbed the pencil and started to write.

On Whittier, she told me. Just past the Taco Bell across the street from the Exxon station. She pronounced the word as "X sown."

I didn't insult her by asking her the street number. If she knew it, she would've told me.

As I wrote, I told her she could be proud of her son. I really had no clue as to whether or not that statement was true, but when I said it she beamed. Then I said that Leo had earned every cent of this fifty dollars and I was certain that he had a fine future ahead of him. The other women in La Tortilleria Internacional absorbed every word. Señora Barreras led a hard life. Why not give her a moment of glory? Lord knows that for her those moments came few and far between.

I thanked her, tipped my hat, and walked out the door.

The garage past the Exxon station near the Taco Bell was called Los Mecánicos Zacatecas.

It was one of those old stucco warehouse-type buildings built probably back in the thirties or even earlier. Instead of hydraulic lifts, there were four wood plank-edged pits dug into the earth. The floor was made of grease-stained cement, smooth, and still flaked with an ancient green paint job.

The place smelled of oil and solvent and sweat.

I stood on the edge of one of the double doors that led into the open bay, staring into dim light, searching for shadows. Nothing moved. I continued to stand perfectly still, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness.

Finally, a hulking shape emerged from beneath a car that hung suspended over one of the pits. The hulk rose to his feet and walked toward me. When the rays of outside light hit his face, I could see that he was a big Indian-looking man, holding a thick wrench in his gnarled fist.

"¿Donde está la ardilla?" I asked. Where's the squirrel?

The man frowned, looking like Geronimo must've looked after he discovered that the reservation he'd been promised didn't have water or game. He stepped toward me.

"Chuy," I said. "Leo Barreras. His mother sent me. I owe him some money."

My words failed to dent the scowl covering the face of the big *indio*.

"I owe him fifty dollars," I said.

The man's voice came out like a low growl. "Nobody owes Chuy that kind of money."

Without another word, he stepped forward, raising the wrench as he did so.

A tire iron leaned against the wall. My choice was to run or grab the tire iron. The memory of Juanita kept me from running. I grabbed the iron.

A door opened in the back of the garage. Dim yellow light from an overhead bulb filtered out. A slim figure, a young man in his early twenties, walked toward the pit. He wore baggy blue jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with some sort of monstrous face that glowed in the dark. He was barefoot. Straight black hair stood up from his head in disarray.

"Chuy?" I asked.

The young man stared at me and then at the big Indian. "Who is it, Hector?"

The big *indio* didn't answer.

When Chuy turned his head and the light glistened off the side of his brown face, I saw it. Hideous black welts, as if someone had pounded him while he was down. A plaster cast enveloped his right thumb.

"Christ," I said. "What happened to you?"

Chuy shrugged. The all-purpose East L.A. answer.

"Listen, Hector," I said, glancing at the big man. "Can we talk for a minute? Without trying to brain each other?"

"Get out!" the mechanic ordered. "You cops have done enough."

"I'm not a cop," I said. "I'm here on my own. I want to talk to Chuy about Henry Carranza."

The young man I assumed to be Chuy the Squirrel visibly flinched. The mechanic took two quick steps toward me and didn't stop until I raised the tire iron.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I told Chuy. "I just want to hear what you told the cops."

"I told them what I saw," Chuy said.

"And what was that?" When he didn't answer I spoke for him. "You were in the tunnel, weren't you? The tunnel that drains the gully where Juanita's body was found. I know what you are, Chuy. A runner. Drugs in, drugs out. Via the water drainage that

stretches between the L.A. River and El Cinco de Mayo Park." When he hesitated, I said, "You don't have to admit anything to me. Just tell me what you saw that night."

"I saw a guy."

"Chuy," the mechanic said. "You don't have to talk to this *cabrón*."

Now that my eyes had fully adjusted to the dim light inside the garage, I had a clearer view of Leo Barreras. He was a little slow. Not only in his speech but in his facial responses. One eyelid drooped as if he was unable to raise it. His lips were twisted and didn't quite close all the way. That, along with a fallen cheek on the bad-eye side, made him look a lot like the rodent he'd been named after.

"I saw a guy," Chuy said. "With a girl. He was strangling her."

"That's it. Just strangling her? Was he trying to get her to do anything?"

This seemed to confuse Chuy. "No."

"Was he asking her questions?"

"Yes. A lot of questions."

"About money?"

"I don't know. I didn't hear that part. He asked her about other things. Like whether or not she thought she was a princess and if she thought that was good or not."

Suddenly, I felt dizzy so I glanced up at the ceiling. Hanging from a low rafter over the pit was one of those ancient cast-iron hoist mechanisms, chains with a cable pulley and a heavy iron hook for replacing engine blocks. It was knotted against the far wall by a heavy rope tied to a post. I closed my eyes, forcing myself to picture the scene of Juanita being taunted by her killer. Apparently, Chuy the Squirrel was seeing the same thing. He stood with his shoulders hunched, staring at the ground.

"When she didn't tell him anything," Chuy continued, "he tightened the rope. Then he'd ask her some more questions and tighten the rope again. Like that."

Anger rose up and clutched my throat like a tightening fist. I stepped toward Chuy. "Why didn't you do something?"

Without warning, Chuy the Squirrel started to cry, whimpering like a little boy. Hector the mechanic waved his wrench at me. I took the hint.

"All right, Chuy. Don't take it so hard. You did your best." When he calmed down, I went at him again. "So who was it? Who was the guy strangling Juanita?"

"I don't know," Chuy said, wiping his eyes with the back of his knuckles.

"What the hell do you mean? You were right there. You were looking at him."

"It was raining. I was in the tunnel."

"Then why did you tell the cops it was Henry Carranza?"

"Maybe it was."

"What do you mean *maybe it was*?"

The sarcasm in my voice caused the big mechanic to waggle his wrench once again. But now I didn't give a damn. I stepped forward, raising my tire iron.

"Who was it, Chuy? Who the hell killed Juanita?"

Chuy's lower lip started to quiver.

"What kind of man are you, Chuy?" I said. "An innocent girl was killed. A girl who didn't deserve to die and you won't tell me who the hell did it?"

The mechanic stepped toward me, but instead of backing off like he expected, I twisted my body and swung the tire iron viciously into his stomach. A great rush of air erupted from his mouth, he dropped the wrench, clutched his stomach, and curled over.

Chuy the Squirrel cowered against the wall. I stepped toward him. Before I was through with him, he'd tell me everything.

Something rattled behind me. Chains. And then something creaked. Something old and rusty and made of iron. Instinctively, I swiveled to my right. But before I could move out of the way, I saw it, the heavy iron hook, swinging straight for my head.

Someone slapped my cheek.

My eyes cranked open like the rusty hinges of a garage door. I stared up at gray sky. Overcast. Threatening to rain. The leaves of palm trees rustled in a gentle breeze. A face hovered over me. A young Chicano man with a wispy mustache and a gold ring through his left nostril. His eyes were full of fire and intelligence. Definitely not Chuy the Squirrel.

"*Levantase, cabrón*," he said. Get up.

Then he slapped me hard across the face. The sting on my flesh brought me fully awake. I wasn't so sure that I wanted to be awake. Rain or no rain, this wasn't turning out to be a great day. Hands grabbed my shoulders and jerked me to a sitting position. Gradually, an awareness of my surroundings seeped into my throbbing brain.

El Cinco de Mayo Park. Near the gully where Juanita was murdered. *Vatos* surrounded me. Their arms crossed, sneering. Laughing. I recognized some of the faces. They were famous in this neighborhood. As famous as young warlords. Los Diablitos.

The Little Devils. The guy speaking was Lalo Quintana. Husky chest. Forearms rippling with blood veins and tattoos. If Lalo was talking while the others remained silent, that meant that he was their new leader.

Lalo slapped me again, harder this time. I struggled to rise to my feet, but more hands reached for me and held me in place.

Somehow I found my voice. "Where's Chuy?"

"Oye, Gonzo," Lalo said. "We found you lying here like you decided to take a nice nap. That's not good. Running around asking questions and then sleeping in the park. You're being a pest, man."

"That's me. Always pestering people."

Lalo pointed both his forefingers at the center of his chest. "We have a business to run."

"So who's stopping you?"

"You're not listening to me, Gonzo. I got a message for you. An important message. Tonight, at midnight, you come back here, alone. Chuy the Squirrel will talk to you. You got that? Alone and unarmed. You and Chuy can talk all you want. After that, I want you to stay away from El Cinco permanently. *Entiendes?*"

Suddenly I was angry. I'm not sure why. Just angry. I raised myself to all fours.

"I got your *entiendes*," I said, grabbing my crotch. "Right here hanging."

Apparently, Los Diablitos didn't appreciate the humor in that remark. In unison, the *vatos* bent their knees, leaned toward me, and ten sets of fists fell on me like a summer-squall.

The rain kept the crowd at El Cinco down to a bare minimum. At this time of night, midnight, there was no one in the park per se. Only on the edges. Punks loitering on the sidewalks selling drugs to the overpriced cars that cruised by. Here, beyond El Teatro Azteca and beyond the well-tended lawn, things were quiet. I stood on the edge of the gully and stared down into the pit.

Slowly, I turned in a complete circle, keeping my hands in my pockets, studying the shimmering darkness that surrounded me. The only light came from the street lamps on the edge of the park.

It was an obvious setup. Meet Chuy at midnight in the park. Alone. Unarmed. But what choice did I have? Now that Chuy knew I was looking for him, I'd never find him. Not unless I took a chance.

I picked out a clump of trees surrounded by bushes near the edge of the gully and stood beneath them. From there I could see the expanse of lawn behind me, El Teatro Azteca across the gully, and much of the thick clump of tropical forest lining the depression

that led down into the cement-lined flood drain. The same drain where Chuy the Squirrel once hid and watched as someone strangled and then killed Juanita Silva.

Water dripped off of palm trees and splashed into mud. Occasionally, a brief wind picked up, rustling big leaves. Other than that, nothing moved. Except for my twitching fingers, checking the revolver tucked snugly next to my heart.

Then, without any noise heralding his arrival, he was there. Standing at the edge of the gully about fifteen yards away, staring down into it, as if in prayer. Chuy wore only sneakers and blue jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt. He must've been cold. And wet. I couldn't tell from here whether he was armed.

I pulled the revolver out of its shoulder holster and stepped out from the shadow of the palm tree. At the edge of the gully, I turned and faced him.

"Why here, Chuy?" I asked. "Why didn't you talk to me earlier today when you had the chance?"

He raised his head, his moist brown eyes glimmering with moonlight.

"Here?" he asked. "I thought you were the one who wanted to meet me here."

Just then, a shot rang out, and Chuy the Squirrel's head exploded.

My knees crumpled and I dove forward, tumbling into the gully. Another shot splashed the mud beside me. I crawled until, like a giant eel, I slid through the broken and twisted iron bars that led into the storm drain.

Feet sloshed up to the edge of the gully. I peered out through the bars but the rain was falling again and the sky was darker than before. I couldn't make out much, just a shadowy figure, crouched next to where Chuy the Squirrel had fallen.

Man? Woman? Chicano? Anglo? No way to tell.

I groped at my shoulder holster. Empty. Somehow, I'd dropped my revolver outside in the mud.

Then the footsteps sloshed down into the gully. I pulled myself back into the darkness. The footsteps sloshed right up to the entrance of the storm drain.

I held my breath.

The bars rattled.

Suddenly, a great blast filled the tunnel. Involuntarily, I grabbed my ears. Something ricocheted off cement and whined through the narrow tube. The stench of burnt gunpowder invaded my nostrils.

Frantically, I searched myself for wounds. None. I was all right. I scuttled backwards into the tunnel, keeping low as I did so. Behind

me, I heard the shooter stepping deeper into the network of storm drains. Coming after me.

The tunnels were larger now and I could stand up, or almost. Hunched over like some enormous chimpanzee, I moved through the maze as if I knew where I was going. But I didn't. I had no clue. The darkness was absolute.

Behind, the footsteps of the shooter stayed close. So close, I imagined I could hear heavy breathing.

Slowly, inexorably, I pulled away from him, and fled into the darkness.

I steeped in the hot tub.

My black suit and my underwear and my socks and even my tie, were knotted in a plastic bag, ready for the dumpster. The material was beyond cleaning. After fleeing through that vile storm drain for what seemed hours, I finally spotted light and crawled back up into the land of the living, the shooter nowhere in sight.

The murder of Chuy the Squirrel made no sense. If somebody other than Henry Carranza had murdered Juanita, why would they want to murder the prime witness against Henry? Unless, of course, Chuy was lying and Chuy had known the identity of the real killer.

Why would the shooter have chased me through the flood drain? To eliminate a witness? Unlikely. He or she had fired from the tree line on a dark night, completely concealed. All the shooter would've had to do was leave the park. Free as a bird. Instead, the shooter took the risk of coming after me—not even sure whether or not I was armed—and entered that hole of a drainage ditch. That was determination.

Only one possible motive: to stop my investigation into the death of Juanita Maria Silva. An idea began to develop in my fevered brain. Amorphous yet. Nothing more than a phantom forming in shadows. I'd need evidence to force the phantom to take on a recognizable shape.

To take on a face.

When I awoke, it was almost noon. I shaved and dressed quickly. No more suits hanging in my closet. I'd been running through them mercilessly during the last few days. Instead, I had to settle for blue jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt that said something about always trusting your urges. I even slipped on an L.A. Dodgers cap. For once, I was your typical Angelino.

I decided to have lunch at Taquería Guaymas. The place was mostly empty so I sat at a table near the front window and ordered a bowl of *albóndigas*.

Taped to the wall behind the cashier was a large, hand-painted poster touting the next performance of El Teatro Azteca. Juanita's name was on it. Supposedly, she'd be performing this Saturday. I considered asking the owner to take it down but finally decided not to bother. As long as there was something left to remind us, she wasn't completely gone.

I called the waitress over. She was short and dark and told me that she had only recently arrived from Chiapas. I asked her about the poster. She told me that *el jefe*, the boss, was very proud of the poster because he had contributed money to the program so the local kids could show the Anglo world how wonderful the folk dances of Mexico really were.

"Your boss donated money?" I asked.

She nodded, her eyes widening slightly as if curious as to why I thought that to be so strange. I thanked her and she went back to her work of folding cloth napkins behind the counter.

I sipped on my coffee. A thought came to me. I pulled out the ledger that I had found in Juanita's room.

Dates, initials, numbers. Small numbers like ten, fifteen, twenty. Before, I had thought those numbers might represent multiples of ten. Or a hundred. Now I reconsidered. The numbers were probably accurate. That's how much Juanita had actually received. Ten dollars, fifteen dollars, twenty dollars. That would make sense if she were asking for donations from small local merchants. And the dates made sense too—the weeks leading up to the last performance of El Teatro Azteca.

The initials were the key that unlocked everything. I had only noticed the posters for El Teatro Azteca in two places, La Panaderia Zapata, where I bought *bolillos* most mornings, and here at Taquería Guaymas. Could it have been placed in many more shops? I scanned the ledger for the initials LPZ and ETG. They were there, next to dollar figures. I envisioned the shops on Whittier and Brooklyn in East L.A., matching their names to the initials listed. Muebleria del Norte, Libreria de la Raza, Mariscos de Mazatlán. They were all there. A perfect match.

There had never been anything mysterious about this ledger. Or the five hundred dollars I had found in the toe of Juanita's hiking boot. All she had done was go door to door with posters rolled up under her arm and asked for contributions for the kids of El Teatro Azteca. If this ledger was any indication, Juanita had seldom been rebuffed. Most of the local merchants were probably happy to contribute a few dollars and then to proudly display the poster announcing that a new generation of Chicanos was carrying on the traditions of the homeland.

No drug dealing involved.
I felt like an ass. What kind of cop was I?
A failed one. And now a failed private dick.

Using the yellow pages, geography, and shoe leather, I systematically checked every entry in Juanita's ledger. The businesses that had contributed formed a circle around El Cinco de Mayo Park and El Teatro Azteca. Within an hour, I had accounted for every set of initials except one: LEDLR. I checked the yellow pages again. No such business was listed. Maybe it wasn't a business, but a person. That was a lot of initials for one person's moniker. Then it dawned on me—a non-profit organization. I continued walking in circles around the park, expanding my search block by block. Finally, I spotted it. LEDLR. La Esperanza de la Raza. The Hope of the Race.

A two-storey, cement block building painted blue with a huge mural depicting the heroic struggles of the Mexican people. The valiant brown faces were crisscrossed with the mad black lines of gangbanger graffiti.

The building held a large boxing gym. About a half dozen heavy bags swung listlessly in the warm afternoon air. Inside the ring, a couple of featherweights sparred with only slightly more gusto than the heavy bags were showing. On the other side of the building was an arts and crafts center. This was busier than the gym. Mostly girls inside, ranging in ages from seven to about twelve.

I searched for the administrative office and found it, the door locked, at the back of the boxing gym. As I rattled the doorknob, I looked around to see if anyone was watching me. Not a soul. I pulled out the filed-down screwdriver and the narrow metal chopstick I use in these situations, and after fumbling with the lock for a few moments, the door popped open. I entered quickly and shut the door behind me. Ahead, two file cabinets against the wall, a desk, a typewriter. No computer.

I started with the file cabinet. Ten minutes later, I found what I was looking for: a copy of the Letter of Determination for tax exempt status. It included the name of the chief executive officer: Aguinalda Baca.

I had a hunch who she might be.

At City Hall, I paid seven fifty for a certified copy of Aguinalda Baca's marriage certificate. It confirmed what I had feared. I meant to fold the document carefully and place it in my pocket. Instead, standing in front of the startled clerk, I crushed it with my bare hands.



How many heroes take public transportation to the final showdown? Not Wyatt Earp. Not Eliot Ness. Certainly not Gary Cooper.

But Gonzo Gonzales does. I don't own a car. As a repo man, it makes life easier. I just show up, grab the car, and deliver it to its rightful owner. Besides, I like the feeling of not being beholden to either Detroit or Tokyo. They can keep their expensive toys and twist in the wind as far as Gonzo Gonzales is concerned.

Kids in the back of the bus were playing their portable radios at full blast, but I wasn't listening. I only thought of what had happened since I first received that frantic phone call from Ezzy.

When Juanita went to La Esperanza de la Raza to request a contribution for El Teatro Azteca, she'd stumbled upon something she had never imagined. Maybe she saw Los Diablitos hanging around. Maybe it dawned on her that the long-standing operation at El Cinco de Mayo Park for selling drive-through drugs to gringos was too good to be true. Or maybe her boyfriend, Henry Carranza, had spilled something to her. Even if he hadn't intended to, Juanita was smart enough to pick up on the slightest revelation.

Los Diablitos were paying for protection. It all made sense, except for one vital link. Who was providing the protection?

Aguinalda Baca's marriage certificate and her married name filled in that piece of the puzzle. Her husband was providing the protection. And he was the same man who murdered Juanita to keep her quiet, then murdered Chuy the Squirrel, hoping to pin that murder on me.

The same guy in every case. The same hand behind the entire operation. The same fallen hero. The same angel who'd become a devil.

I should've realized it when he told me so quickly that the informant was Leo Barreras. When he turned over the arrest to the glory-hungry Gang Unit. Who else could've put so much pressure on Leo Barreras, alias Chuy the Squirrel, to lie about a murder? Who else could've ordered Lalo Quintana, the leader of Los D's, to beat me up and tell me to meet Chuy at midnight in the center of El Cinco de Mayo Park?

In our neighborhood, only one man had that much power.

When I reached my stop, I took a transfer slip from the driver, waited twenty minutes, and then caught another bus heading north. We crossed the low-lying range of the Santa Monica Mountains and then rolled down into a smog-filled valley named after a saint called Fernando.



I made my way up Emerald Avenue.

The wind from the Pacific picked up and started to blow in gusts. Then the first splats of rain hit the sidewalk. An old pal on the force, Mike Fuentes, had given me the address and some background information on Aguinalda Baca. He and some other cops had come up here from time to time for impromptu get-togethers. By the time I arrived at the wrought-iron gates of La Casa de Portillo, a steady drizzle filled a slate gray sky.

The house in Woodland Hills was quiet. No car in the driveway. No dog barking. No parakeets chirping. Light seeped through the front window. I followed a flagstone path to the front porch and then rapped on the door with a brass knocker in the shape of a wickedly horned bull.

No answer.

I shook raindrops off my fedora and rang the bell. When there was still no answer, I started to pound on the door with my fist. I prayed she was home because it was Lieutenant Portillo's wife I wanted to talk to. I had a copy of the marriage certificate in my pocket.

I was about to walk toward the side of the house and check around back when suddenly the front door swiveled open.

"Can't you be more patient?"

She was about average height with red hair puffed slightly on top, an attractive pixie-like face, and a nice figure.

"Aguinalda Baca?" I asked.

She crossed her arms over a blue flower-print dress cinched at the waist by a lavender belt. "Mrs. Portillo," she answered.

"I used to know a family named Baca," I said. "One of the brothers went to Roosevelt High."

"What do you want?"

"To talk," I said. "About your husband."

Her eyes remained dead. It took some convincing, but eventually she must've realized two things. One, that I wasn't going to hurt her and, two, that I wasn't going away. She opened the door wider and let me in.

The front room of the Portillos' home was a work of art. Atop the mantle, below what appeared to be a hand-carved silver crucifix, hung a huge color photograph of Inspector Portillo shaking hands with a man in the black flowing robes of an evangelical preacher. I recognized him from TV. Next to Portillo, beaming, stood an attractive Hispanic woman—Aguinalda.

Protestants. Evangelical ones at that. First they leave the barrio, then they leave the Church. But who the hell was I to criticize? I had avoided my religious duties for so long that if I decided after

all these years to make my confession, the priests would have to listen in shifts.

The sofa and settee and chairs seemed to be made of teak or mahogany. And the upholstery was stitched with an elaborate maze of petals and vines. Vases, both crystal and porcelain, were filled with fresh roses and lilies.

More framed photographs surrounded the walls. The Portillos posing in front of various European tourist attractions: The Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum in Rome, Big Ben in London. One of the more beautiful photographs appeared to be of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. They both wore berets in that one and smiled as broadly as it is humanly possible to smile.

All this on a cop's salary?

Mrs. Portillo read my mind.

"My husband and I take great pride in our home," she said. "Every extra dollar has been invested in what you see. And we take great pride in our heritage. That's why we made a point of visiting Spain."

We sat on hand-embroidered upholstery in her exquisite front room while I started to explain why I was there. She stopped, excused herself, and left for about ten minutes.

She could have called her husband on his cell phone. But I didn't figure that was what she was doing. She seemed intrigued by my presence somehow. I fidgeted on the couch, losing my confidence with each second that ticked by on the big grandfather clock against the wall, half expecting her to return now with a pistol. Instead, she walked back in carrying a silver tray, set it on the coffee table, and poured us both a cup of tea.

I noticed that she was less defensive now. Her hands were relaxed, her green eyes had a sparkle to them that I hadn't seen before. A false sparkle, like cheap fireworks on the Fourth of July. The kind of sparkle I'd seen hundreds of times in the eyes of the kids who hang out at El Cinco de Mayo Park.

She was busy ladling sugar into a porcelain cup when I said, "Does your husband supply you?"

She froze, her arm still outstretched. "What are you talking about?"

"You're using," I answered.

She stared at me long and hard, as if trying to decide what kind of person I was. Finally, she spoke.

"What of it? I'm not the only person in the world with bad habits."

I have to admit that she kept her cool. Showing no visible reaction, she reached to the end of the table and grabbed a decanter

of brandy. She poured two shots and then pushed the tea cups out of the way. Grabbing the booze, we clinked glassware, and I said, "Salud." We both drank deeply.

"I know about your arrest record," I told her. This was some more of the information Mike Fuentes had dug up for me. "A few times for hooking in Venice. The last bust was in East L.A., Boyle Heights to be exact, and the arresting officer was your current husband, Lieutenant Ruben Portillo."

She stared at me impassively, sipping her brandy.

"The alias on your sheet was Nelda. You'd been working out of Venice but for some reason you decided to go independent and started working a different neighborhood. It didn't last long. Ruben busted you almost before you got started."

I stared into her deep green eyes. No movement. No protest either.

"You moved in with him. Later, you two were married."

Unconsciously, she glanced at her ring. A huge rock that must've set Ruben Portillo back a few thousand bucks.

"Things were fine. You joined an Anglo church. Pretty good for a couple of Chicanos."

"Hispanics," she said. "Chicanos are Mexicans."

She sat silently for a while, gazing at the far wall. A gust of wind rattled the front window and rain like BBs spattered the pane. Still, Aguinalda Baca sat without moving. Maybe she decided that there was no sense trying to hide the truth anymore. Maybe she decided that it would be nice to finally discuss old times with a third party. Maybe she decided that her husband would kill me soon anyway. Whatever her reasons, she poured us both more brandy. I smelled her perfume and as she leaned across the coffee table, she allowed me a glimpse down her loose neckline.

"I've been a good wife to him," she said. "And he knew my grandmother. Not from Mexico. A lady from Sevilla whose family had to leave Spain when she was a child during the Civil War. And my grandfather, he was a *hacendado* near Guadalajara. His family spent two hundred years in Mexico and emerged without one drop of Indian blood." She drank again, staring at me slyly over the lip of her tumbler. "I doubt you can say the same for your family."

"I'm sure I can't," I answered. "Does your husband feel the same way about mestizos?" People of mixed European and Indian blood.

"I'm not sure if he did at first. But all those years at Hollenbeck. All the violence. All the stupidity."

Now I had a better idea of what kind of couple Aguinalda Baca and Ruben Portillo were. Racists. Of the type found south of the

border. Always claiming to be white Europeans, looking down their pointed noses at *los indios* working in the fields.

"This home," I said, "the trips to Spain, the nice cars. Maybe even the charitable contributions that bought you so much influence with your gringo church, it all added up, didn't it?"

Aguinalda stared at me, slightly amused.

I continued.

"So your credit cards were maxed out, maybe your home mortgaged for its full value, maybe you had a ton of consumer loans outstanding, and, of course, your husband wouldn't want you to work. Not the granddaughter of a lady from Sevilla. Without skills, what could you do? Clean motel rooms? Not suitable for the wife of a rich Castilian *hacendado*. That would make you look too much like the poor women of East L.A."

This brought Aguinalda Portillo alive. She sat up straight, her breasts trying to burst out of her silk blouse.

"You needed money," I continued. "So your husband set up this deal. Or maybe it was your idea. Provide protection for Henry Carranza and Los Diablitos so they could deal their drugs in peace at El Cinco de Mayo Park. They pay for the privilege, but instead of putting the money in your pocket directly, you filter it through La Esperanza de la Raza, a non-profit organization. When you want to take a trip to Spain, you let the organization pay for it. When you want to buy influence with your gringo church, you let the organization make the contribution. A sweet deal. But then some girl from the barrio comes along asking for contributions to El Teatro Azteca. She sees things, she hears things, and she picks up clues from Henry Carranza, the leader of Los D's. She's a smart girl and she puts it all together and suddenly she knew all the things you've been trying to keep secret for so long. And suddenly you knew something had to be done about it. Something had to be done to protect yourself. To protect the Hope of the Race."

I leaned forward. "Did you give the order, Aguinalda, or was it your husband's idea?"

As I talked, Aguinalda's flippancy disappeared. She drank heavily and then, losing all inhibition, pulled something out of the small drawer in the coffee table. Cocaine. She offered me a snort. I declined. Although I did help myself to more brandy.

"Your husband went too far," I said. "He killed that young woman. He killed Juanita Maria Silva."

Aguinalda nodded somberly. "Yes. It must've been an accident. He's a good man."

I stared at her, contemplating murder.

Nervously, Aguinalda sipped more brandy.

"That girl," she said, "that Juanita Silva, she was a talented girl, wasn't she?"

"Very."

"Part Indian, I suppose, but really what the hell difference does it make?"

I didn't answer.

"By the way," she asked, "what's your interest in all this?"

I swallowed before I answered, keeping firm control of my voice.

"Juanita Silva was my niece."

Aguinalda pulled a pack of cigarettes out of the drawer, offered me one, but I refused. She lit one of the long filter-tips, puffed on it two or three times, and then crushed it out in a crystal ashtray.

"No sense starting again," she said. "Took me months to kick the habit." She crossed her arms and gazed at me. "So what are they going to do with my husband?"

"Big trouble," I said.

"Unless he murders you too."

"Too late. My attorney knows everything."

This was a lie. But I told it as convincingly as I could.

A car pulled up in the driveway. Aguinalda Portillo glanced toward the sound. Then she jumped lightly to her feet, straightened the pleats in her dress, and peeked out the Venetian blinds, staring past rivulets of rainwater.

"He's home," she said.

Aguinalda Baca Portillo reached once again into the drawer in the coffee table. Like the fabled cornucopia it first offered up cocaine and then nicotine and now something a little more frightening: a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver.

She pointed it at my nose.

"It's loaded," she said.

"I don't doubt it."

"And I know how to use it."

"I don't doubt that either."

She made me stand and empty my pockets and then had me lift my T-shirt to make sure I was unarmed. Then she had me turn around and lift my pant legs. When she was satisfied, she said, "You'll walk in front of me about five paces. We'll walk though the door and out into the yard. If you make any funny moves, I'll shoot you. *Entiendes?*"

"Got it," I answered.

We stepped out into the rain.

Portillo climbed out of his silver BMW. When he spotted me, he

stepped quickly around the car. He wore black slacks and a white shirt without a tie. Regal. As ramrod straight as a matador planted in the center of *la plaza de toros*.

Aguinalda turned toward me and said, "You stand right here. If you move, I'll shoot you."

I nodded my understanding.

Then she turned, spread a smile across her face, and bounded like a young girl across the wet lawn. Still holding the pistol in her hand, she leapt into her husband's arms, hugged him, and kissed him on the neck.

"What is it?" Portillo asked. "What's he doing here?"

Aguinalda Baca didn't answer, she just continued to cling to her husband, pressing her face against his white shirt. Then she pushed herself away from him.

"He knows," she said. "And soon, everyone will know. They'll humiliate us. All the Chicanos will laugh at us. All the *vatos*. All the *cholas*. We'll be put in prison. Like common criminals."

"Don't worry," Portillo said. "I'll take care of everything."

She shook her head, tears flowing now, makeup and mascara running down puffed cheeks.

"There's a way out," Portillo said. "There's always a way out."

I took a step toward them.

Portillo made a quick move and snatched the pistol from his wife's grip. He pointed it at me.

I hesitated. My mind said continue forward, die like a man. Force Portillo to shoot you. My original plan was to come here, get close to him, and reach out and strangle him with my bare hands, as I had sworn to do when I'd first seen Juanita's body lying in that drainage ditch. But maybe the flesh is wiser than the mind. Despite my orders, my body stopped. I stood still, not twenty feet from the loving couple.

Portillo smiled.

His wife looked back and forth between us, her face a mask of worry. I knew what she was thinking. There's no way out. They were sure to be caught. Tears streamed from her eyes, but then she composed herself. The serenity that overcame her was that of someone who's made an important decision. Somehow, she managed to smile, then she stepped closer to her husband.

Portillo glanced at his wife but by now she had closed the gap between them and she was hugging him again, pressing her red hair fully up against his chest, her eyes shut, tears falling from wrinkled lids. Deftly, she twisted the pistol out of her husband's hand and shoved the barrel firmly up beneath his heaving rib cage.

I should've known earlier. But I'd been too self-involved.

Time, as so often happens when lives are at stake, took on a new set of physical properties. It started to move sluggishly, like syrup being poured.

"No!" I shouted. Suddenly, my body was set free and I sloshed through the mud, but my feet felt heavy. I wasn't moving fast enough.

I understood now why Aguinalda Portillo had been so open with me. She'd known from the beginning, maybe from the moment she'd seen me standing on her porch, that it was over. And knowing that, she'd wanted to talk. To get a few things off her chest. Maybe mitigate some of the shame she felt for allowing Juanita to be murdered. Maybe tonight she had harbored a glimmer of hope that her husband would set things right, as he had set so many things right before, but now she knew he had failed. Their world would collapse. If not now, soon. And forever.

The blast jolted Portillo upright.

Someone screamed. I think it was me.

Once again, Lieutenant Ruben Portillo stood as ramrod straight as a matador in the bull ring. But this time his posture was that of a matador who'd been gored in the belly. A look of surprise filled his face. His knees buckled and he clutched his stomach, blood running between splayed fingers. He stared incredulously at his wife.

She was crying even harder now, shouting, screaming so loudly that I couldn't make out the words. And then they started to make sense. She was screaming that she loved him.

I was still moving toward her. Once again the gun recoiled wildly in her nervous grip. I threw my hands up, thinking she had fired toward me, and I threw myself into the mud.

Aguinalda Baca's husband had crumpled to the ground, his knees sinking slowly into the soft earth.

I tried to rise back to my feet but couldn't. All the strength seemed to have left my legs.

Aguinalda Baca stroked the back of her husband's head with her bare palm, crying all the while, mumbling something indecipherable with moist lips. Then she pressed the barrel of the .38 up against the temple of the famous detective.

Ruben Portillo gazed up at her, wonder filling his big eyes.

Two words come out of her mouth. "*Te adoro.*"

Then she pulled the trigger.

Portillo's skull jerked back, red blood exploded in a million tiny droplets, and his lifeless body collapsed.

I managed to find my footing and took a lurching step forward.

Aguinalda pirouetted. Her eyes, full of tears, focused on my

face. She pointed the pistol at me and a hideous smile spread across her rouged lips.

"We looked good," she said. "We always looked good, didn't we?"

Then she twisted her wrist awkwardly, opened her mouth, and stuck the barrel between her pearly white teeth.

A blast filled the universe.

When the cops arrived at La Casa de Portillo, they knocked me flat on the wet grass, turned me over, cuffed me, and when they realized that one of their own was dead, they beat the holy *albóndigas* out of me.

My public defender was some kid with a freshly inked diploma from some mail-order law school but he handled himself like a pro. First, he forced the LAPD to run a ballistics test on the slug that had taken the life of Leo Barreras. The test matched the hunting rifle found in the trunk of Portillo's BMW.

However, the LAPD wasn't ready to give up a Latino hero so easily. They claimed that by shooting Chuy the Squirrel, Lieutenant Portillo had, in fact, been performing top-flight police work. If he hadn't shot Chuy, then Chuy would've shot me.

When you're cooling your heels in the L.A. County lockup, you learn not to quibble over details. But what bothered me was how the LAPD played Juanita's death.

There was no direct evidence linking Portillo to Juanita's murder, and no one wanted to listen to my take on the sequence of events that had led to her death. Still, a reasonable doubt was raised, and on that basis, all charges against Henry Carranza were dropped. A quid pro quo. Henry the quid. The honor of the LAPD the quo.

Did the LAPD suspect me of murdering Ruben Portillo and his wife? Of course they did. But the pistol that had actually killed Ruben was found with only his wife's prints on it and it was obvious to even the first cops on the scene that she'd used the pistol to take her own life. The question was, had I forced her into committing the murder and then the suicide?

The presumption was pretty farfetched. No one had ever heard of any such crime being perpetrated before—at least not on an experienced cop and his wife—but the LAPD would've been willing to go with it if it hadn't been for my public defender. He organized the evidence I had given him so well, and presented it so forcefully, that the cops knew that if they brought me to trial, not only would I tarnish the memory of Lieutenant Ruben Portillo but, more importantly, that evidence would bring to light a long history of corruption in the LAPD.

When my "interrogators" couldn't beat a confession out of me, somebody at City Hall made the final decision.

All charges against me were dropped.

Three days after his death at the hands of his wife, Lieutenant Ruben Portillo was feted to the funeral of a hero. A big black hearse, lines of motorcycle cops, and an honor guard of uniformed police. The mayor attended, along with the chief of police.

I sat in Ezzy's front room, watching the ceremony on cable. Mercifully, she was at Catholic Mass.

The entire Gang Unit stood at attention in dress blues. When the mayor took the podium and started to say what a wonderful guy Portillo had been, it was more than I could stand. I cursed and grabbed the remote and flicked off the power.

I slipped on my coat and walked the five blocks over to El Cinco de Mayo Park. The rain had disappeared finally and sunshine once again filled the L.A. sky.

When I reached the park, a sudden gust of wind carried the fresh scent of the ocean in from the Pacific. It made me think of Juanita, of how she would so enjoy this day at the park and how she would make everyone laugh and how she would turn this beauty that surrounds us into a dance. 🐦

Solution to the May "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

- A. Rights
- B. Ossifies
- C. By the way
- D. Embossing
- E. Relevant
- F. Tattletale
- G. Money
- H. Atheist

- I. Cooking
- J. Finite
- K. Antlers
- L. Romantic
- M. Lonesome
- N. Anonymous
- O. Noodles
- P. Everybody
- Q. Tennis shoes

- R. Hummingbird
- S. Elvis Presley
- T. Lawnmower
- U. Off the wall
- V. Doorknob
- W. Goshen
- X. Effortless
- Y. Reacting

QUOTATION

Author—ROBERT MACFARLANE

Work—"THE LODGER" (*The New York Times*, January 18, 2004)

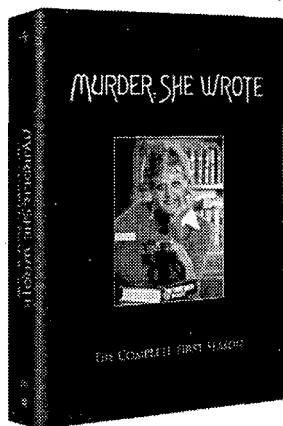
"Walter Mosley is best known for his Easy Rawlins books . . . The edges of these novels frayed into something . . . more interesting than the mystery genre normally permits, and . . . won Mosley . . . the ambiguous accolade of being one of Bill Clinton's favorite novelists."

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Most years, it's big cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles that vie for the dubious title of Murder Capital of America. But throughout the 1980's and into the 1990's, the nation's most dangerous community wasn't a major metropolis. It was tiny Cabot Cove, Maine, an otherwise charming seaside hamlet cursed with the highest per capita murder rate in the world.

Cabot Cove may have been a perilous place, but that didn't stop millions of people from visiting there each week—courtesy of their television sets. As the many devoted fans of the long-running series *Murder, She Wrote* know well, Cabot Cove was home to mystery writer/amateur sleuth Jessica Fletcher (Angela Lansbury). And now those fans can time-warp back to Cabot Cove's deadly heyday thanks to a new DVD collection, *Murder, She Wrote: The Complete First Season*.



Though known for its rigid whodunit formula (nearly every episode found Jessica using her crime-solving skills to prove a friend or family member didn't commit murder), the series was groundbreaking in ways it doesn't always get credit for. Before Jessica Fletcher came along, for instance, the TV Detectives Clubhouse had a strict "No Girls Allowed" policy—unless you wanted to be a secretary, girlfriend, or victim, that is.

"There never really had been a woman protagonist who carried the whole show without any help from the males who surround her," says William Link, who co-created *Murder, She Wrote* with longtime writing-producing partner Richard Levinson and Peter S. Fischer. "There was *Police Woman* [in the 1970's], but on that show the males were always bailing Angie Dickinson out. We

created a strong woman protagonist who solved cases on her own and didn't need to be rescued by men."

Perhaps surprisingly, that innovation wasn't something Link and his collaborators had to fight to get past cautious network suits. Quite the opposite: It's what the network wanted from the get-go. *Murder, She Wrote* was born from a meeting Link and Levinson had in the early 1980's with CBS programming honcho Harvey Shephard. Shephard specifically wanted a detective show with a female lead for his network's schedule, and he thought Link and Levinson (the writing-producing team that had created *Columbo* and brought such series as *Ellery Queen*



William Link

to the airwaves) had the TV mystery know-how to dream one up. Working with Fischer, Link and Levinson created Jessica Fletcher and came up with the plot for a movie-of-the-week, *The Murder of Sherlock Holmes*, that would introduce her to America.

But before they could get a definitive green light from Shephard, they had to find the right actress to bring their heroine to life. They knew exactly who they wanted, however . . . Jean Stapleton.

Yes, that Jean Stapleton—Archie Bunker's "dingbat" wife from *All in the Family*. Unfortunately for Stapleton (but fortunately, perhaps, for everyone else), the actress chose to pass on the project.

"We sent her the script [for the TV movie] and she said she didn't understand it," Link recalls. "That seemed very strange—it's not quantum physics. We thought it was a quality murder mystery script and that it sold the Fletcher character well. So we were really nonplussed and we went back to see Harvey at CBS thinking he would put a headstone on the whole thing."

Instead, Shephard gave Link and company one more chance to come up with a lead. This time around they suggested a respected film character actress and Broadway performer with almost no television credits on her long resumé: Angela Lansbury. Despite the her low "TV Q" (the rating that assesses a celebrity's name recognition amongst television



viewers). Shephard was enthusiastic about the idea. Only one task remained: convincing Lansbury herself.

"We had a meeting with Angela at five o'clock on a Friday afternoon in the 'Black Tower' [the fabled headquarters for high-level studio execs] at Universal, and she said, 'I'll read your script, but I have to tell you—I have another script to read this weekend. It's [*All in the Family* producer] Norman Lear's new sitcom,'" Link says. "My heart just sank. I thought, Ugh. Up against Norman! For an actress, a half-hour sitcom is much easier to do than an hour-long drama. But Angela said, 'I will definitely get back to you Monday morning. I'm always good on my word.' And sure enough she called us Monday morning and said, 'I'm yours.' Those were very sweet words to hear!"

Not just sweet—Lansbury's decision was pivotal. Though he's a big believer in the importance of good scripts, Link is canny enough about TV audiences to know that it's actors, not writers, who bring viewers back week after week. And in Angela Lansbury, he'd found someone who could bring those viewers back by the millions.

"When Angela said yes, that sealed the fate of *Murder, She Wrote*," Link says. "Jean Stapleton is a wonderful actress, but I don't think she has the strength that Angela has. Angela has the same thing Peter Falk has as Columbo—a charm and a projected intelligence. The audience has to believe that this character actually has the brain cells. Peter as a person is smart, and that comes through on screen. And the same goes for Angela."

After *The Murder of Sherlock Holmes* was a hit, CBS quickly put in an order for twenty-one episodes of a series. (It's those twenty-one episodes, along with the initial TV movie, that are available on the new DVD collection.) Levinson (who passed away in 1987) and Link stayed involved as story consultants, while Fischer signed on as the series's executive producer. *Murder, She Wrote* premiered September 30, 1984, and ran for twelve seasons, racking up huge ratings and dozens of Emmy nominations in the process.

But eventually Jessica Fletcher fell victim to perhaps the most puzzling stab in the back of her long mystery-solving career: CBS killed her series even though it was still hugely popular.

The problem wasn't that *Murder, She Wrote* didn't draw enough viewers. It simply didn't draw enough of the young viewers advertisers prefer.

"*Murder, She Wrote* could have gone on for many more years if it hadn't skewed to an older audience," Link says. "Television is obsessed with genuflecting at the fountain of youth. It doesn't

make any sense, because the kids will buy a six-pack of Coca-Cola whereas the older audience is going to buy a Lexus. But it doesn't make any difference—[networks] want the young demographic."

So CBS execs gave Jessica Fletcher the axe . . . and like the culprits on *Murder, She Wrote*, they were darned sneaky about it.

"Angela was not told by CBS. She was told on the set by an executive from Universal," Link fumes. "No one—including Les Moonves, the head of CBS—had the courtesy after twelve years and all the money they made from that show to call Angela."

Sadly, the ageism that knocked off Jessica Fletcher in 1996 hasn't faded away. In fact, it's stronger than ever. Even a TV veteran like Link, with multiple successes under his belt (not to mention Emmys and Edgars), has fallen victim to it: He says he had to take his latest series idea overseas because American studios and networks aren't interested in pitches from producers his age.

"They just want the kids," sighs Link (who got his start in television adapting his own stories from *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* for the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* series). "You hit your sixties, and forget it. And now it's really back in your forties. It's getting very, very bad."

So bad, in fact, that the broadcast networks would never even think about scheduling a series like *Murder, She Wrote* today.

"It's considered old fashioned now. So is *Columbo*. If you want to sell a new series, it's got to have forensics in it," Link says. "Oh, well. That's television."

Fortunately, even if the networks aren't interested in Old School whodunits, the studios have discovered that there are big profits to be made from repackaging shows like *Murder, She Wrote* and *Columbo* on DVD. So once again, Jessica Fletcher might be a trailblazer—this time, hopefully, as one of the advance scouts for the eventual DVD return of TV detectives like Cagney and Lacey, Joe Mannix, and Barnaby Jones.

As they say in television, stay tuned . . .



Angela Lansbury as Jessica Fletcher



UNSOLVED

LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING



Leda Delatorre gave an inward sigh of relief when she spotted Customs Officer Ernest Chekov at JFK International Airport. Lining up the ten couples of her Magnificent Morocco tour group and giving them specific instructions, she hurried forward.

Leda and Chekov were well acquainted, for she had been regularly clearing Customs with her clients every two weeks for years. "Ernie," she confided, "I may be bringing you a problem."

"How so, Leda?" he asked.

"Frankly, I've never had a group like this one. They refused to stick together, wandering off and doing Lord knows what before returning with suspicious alibis. My intuition tells me you'd better check their luggage *thoroughly*."

"Those your problem kiddies lined up at checkpoint B?"

"The very same."

"Tell me about 'em."

"Very well. One wife is named Ellen. Each couple shares a distinctive kind of luggage, and—

1. As you can see, the women include three blondes, three redheads, and four brunettes, but no two with the same hair color stand next to each other. The blondes are Doris, Mrs. Unser, and the lady with blue leather luggage. The redheads are Mrs. VanDusen, Allen's wife, and the lady with the green fabric luggage. And the brunettes are Iris, Mrs. Washburn, Dan's wife, and the one with the black leather luggage.
2. As they are lined up, Mrs. Saunders stands just behind Brett's wife and just ahead of the lady with green fabric luggage, who is just ahead of Clara.
3. Jim's wife is just behind Betty and just ahead of the lady with green leather luggage, who is two places ahead of Mrs. Rappaport.
4. Floyd is just behind Mr. Yager and just ahead of the man with purple fabric luggage, who stands immediately ahead of Greta's husband. Two of their wives have red hair

5. The second, fourth, sixth, and ninth place men include (in some order) Claude (who is immediately ahead of George), Mr. VanDusen, and the two gents with the tan and leather and plaid fabric luggage.
6. Mrs. Xander is four places behind the lady with orange fabric luggage and two places ahead of Helen. They include two red-heads and one brunette. They are married to Brett, Claude, and Allen (who is neither first nor last in line).
7. Flora is three places behind Ed's wife (who is not Iris) and two places ahead of the lady with the red canvas luggage (who isn't married to Dan or George). Each has hair of a different color. Their last names are (in some order) Tompkins, Unser, and VanDusen.
8. Ivan's wife stands just behind Mrs. Tompkins; more than two places farther back in line is Alice. Two of them are blondes. Their luggage (in some order) includes the black leather, the plaid fabric, and the blue leather.
9. Joyce is just behind Mrs. Quigley and just ahead of the lady with tan leather luggage.
10. Harry stands three places behind Mr. Zinger (who is not first in line) and two places ahead of the man with red leather luggage. They are married (in some order) to Alice, Betty, and Clara, two of whom are brunettes and the other a blonde.

As Mr. Chekov got the names straightened out, a commotion broke out. A redhaired woman snatched the luggage of the brunette immediately in front of her and dashed for the exit!

Impulsively, the victim cried out, "Omigod! There go all the diamonds!"

The Customs agent promptly signaled for the area to be sealed off. The thief was quickly subdued and handcuffed. "And now," said Ernest Chekov, "let's have a look at the contents of that luggage."

His experienced fingers soon discovered the bulge in the lining, which when slit revealed a fortune in diamonds. "Aha!" he declared. "A double-header—a would-be thief and a would-be smuggler. Thanks for tipping me off, Leda."

What were the names of the thief and smuggler?

The solution will appear in the July-August issue.

OUR DAUGHTER IS IN HEAVEN

ELAINE MENGE

Walt let the dog's leash dangle as he stopped to view the house they were passing. The look of awe on his face set Gwen's teeth on edge. Piccolo, their miniature long-haired dachshund, gazed up at Walt with equal ardor. "Beautiful," Walt said. "Look at those pointy windows. Like a New England church, don't you think? Lots of clean, clear light."

Late Texas Gothic, Gwen said to herself, awarding her husband's comment an agreeable nod. He was too easily impressed. If she told him what an architectural mish-mash she thought the house truly was, he'd draw in, show wounded disapproval. After five years of marriage she found it best to keep quiet than differ with Walt on matters of taste.

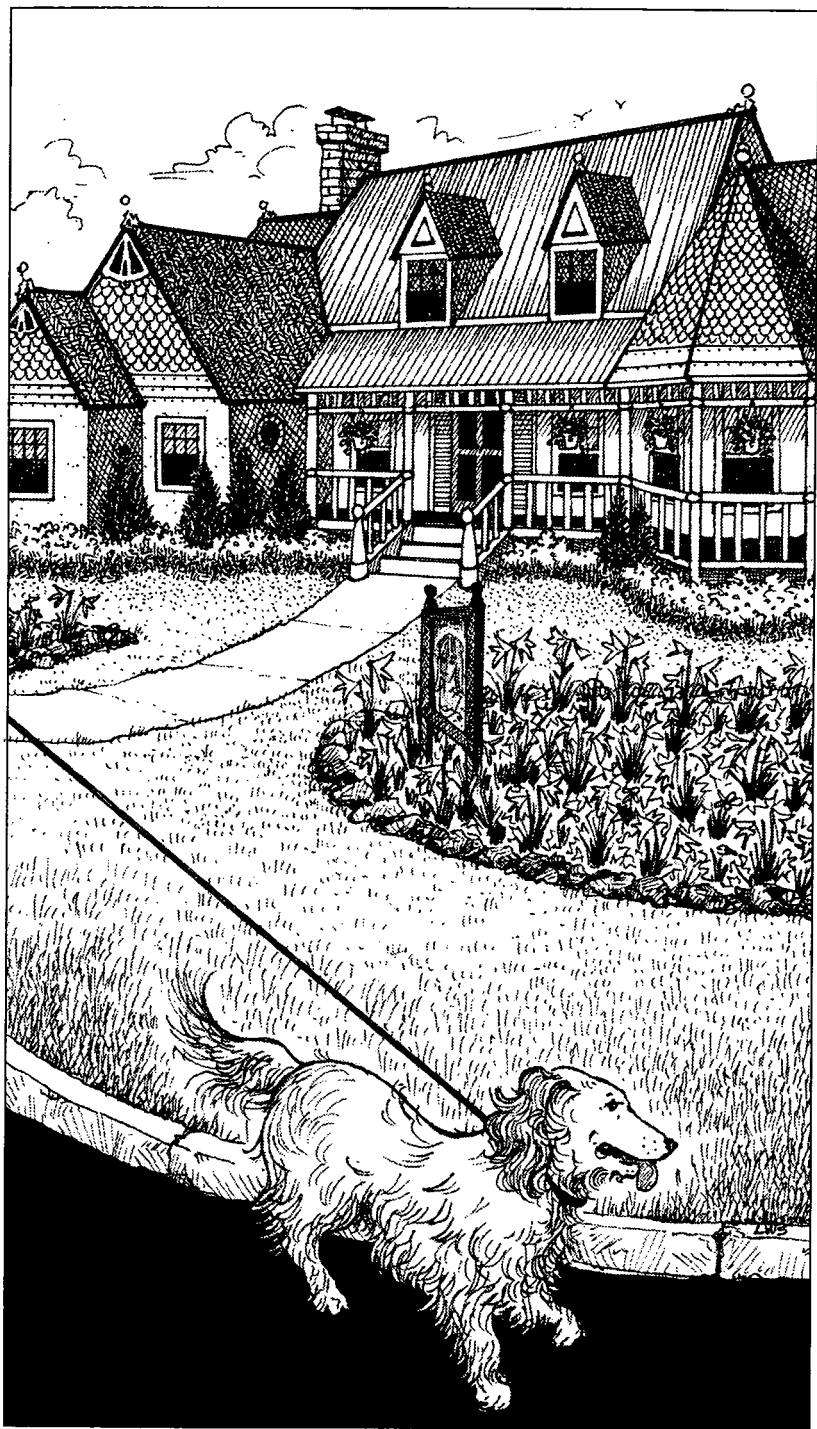
Gwen reached out and tugged the leash's slack line. Like a miniature donkey, Piccolo resisted, backing toward the middle of the street. "Car's passing! Watch out!"

Walt reeled the leash in as a Lexus SUV blew by. He rolled his eyes. "You're way too protective. Piccolo wouldn't run in front of that car."

She would in a heartbeat, Gwen thought. They both knew Piccolo wasn't blessed with brains. "You really need to rein her in when cars pass. Gosh, I wish this neighborhood had sidewalks. I didn't notice that when we put in the offer."

"See how those windows are set?" Walt pointed at the same house. "I think the architect who did ours must've designed this one too."

Gwen eyed the many-gabled home, delivered another stage nod. Right, and no doubt the architect who'd done theirs had done most of the houses around here. Variation on a theme. The House of Seven Gables to the power of ten. How many roof angles were



Linda Weatherly

possible? It was as if the designer asked himself, How many peaks can I fit in a linear foot?

She glanced at the house next to the one Walt was admiring. Oh boy, there was another of those weird signs: a big plywood cutout of a soccer ball staked in the garden with the words A HIGHLANDER TIGER LIVES HERE! printed beneath the cartoon ball. Beside it a cutout of a pom-pom announced A HIGHLANDER LASSIE LIVES HERE!

"I've never seen signs like these before," Gwen said. "Some even include the kids' names. It's a perfect smorgasbord for a pedophile. You've got the name, address, the child's ruling interest . . ."

Walt shrugged. "I think it's a neat idea."

Gwen took the leash from Walt and gave it a quick pull, jerking the dachshund's interminable snout out of a Mexican heather bush. "And we really can't let her nose around bushes. She's allergic to bees, and sometimes wasps nest in bushes."

"Overprotective." Walt laughed. "Once we have a kid, you're going to be so . . . The kid won't be able to do anything."

Gwen felt a jab of anger. About Piccolo she didn't mind being direct. "It's too bad you weren't along when I raced her to the vet. Anaphylactic shock—not pretty. And that was New Orleans. The emergency vet here is even farther away! And these things always happen after hours."

"Yada, yada, yada." Walt strolled on, hands in pockets.

"Twice I went through that," said Gwen, following. "I know you love Piccolo, but you need to anticipate what she can get into. But yada, yada. That's all you can say."

"I thought you liked our house," said Walt.

"What? Where'd that come from?"

"I could tell from your expression when we passed that one back there. You seem to be putting down all the houses, all of Brigadoon. You don't like our house?"

"I love it." Gwen faced Walt, tried to link up with his eyes, but Walt stared at a distant rooftop as if something important had just landed on its peak. "I love the windows," Gwen continued, "and I'm thankful it isn't a house of more than seven gables." She laughed. "But it's seductive, this whole community. Perfect, but what a price. Brigadoon. Can you believe we live in a place called Brigadoon?"

"You'd rather loud music and non-stop basketball games?"

Gwen didn't answer that one. She missed New Orleans, but she did not miss the noise. The city was a mess. People threw trash out their windows and cruised the potholed streets in mufflerless bombs, the school system was a shambles, and the crime rate was

the worst in the country. But it was her hometown. The people might be as messy as the streets, but they were real, just themselves, without apology.

"At least New Orleans has character," she said after many steps. "Bad character, maybe, but the folks around here are robots. 'Hi, how are ya,' " she mimicked. " 'Love your grass, just love your little doggie-poo. See my Lexus? See my Eddie Bauer Land Rover? My cute shiny Mini Cooper? My cuter Vespa? Imagine my bucks. The bucks and bucks we have.' Christ, Walt. How did we land here?"

He shook his head in beat with his stride. "Well, we're Texans now. Get used to it."

"This isn't Texas. It's Disneyland. Sam Houston would die of embarrassment. Oh boy, here comes another one." Staked beside a thin-trunked oak in front of a mock Tudor home was a huge cutout of a ballerina, the name Adrienne printed down one leg. Emblazoned on the tutu's sash were the words: COLLINS COLLEENS—DANCE CAPTAIN. Amongst azalea bushes across the street stood a plywood trumpet: OUR SON PLAYS IN THE COLLINS COUGARS BAND. FIRST CHAIR TRUMPET was added with a black marker. "Well, la-di-da," Gwen muttered. "This is getting competitive."

The street made a gentle, uphill S-curve. They strolled on. Just ahead stood another multi-gabled home, its neat green lawn filling the belly of the street's curve. River stones defined an island garden near the driveway planted with butterfly iris, amaryllis, and cyclamen. Another sign, this one mounted on two thick wooden legs, reared up just behind the butterfly iris, angled to face the walkers.

As Gwen approached, she noticed this sign was more sophisticated. Its legs were made of a glossy, expensive wood, and it was fashioned like a giant frame. Glass was even involved in its construction. The sun glared off it, making her squint.

"What now?" she said. "Coming up on the right."

Walt visored a hand above his brow. "A portrait?"

Gwen jutted her head forward to catch the first clear glimpse of the approaching face. "Of a girl? No real estate agent, that's for sure. Looks like a yearbook picture."

"A blonde." Walt raised his brows, as if contemplating a dumb blonde joke he thought better of repeating. "Like you. That could be your hair."

Yes, Gwen thought. Even the hairline, the slight widow's peak, was like her own. The color portrait was bigger than life-size, about three feet wide by five feet tall. The girl's pale yellow hair stood out against a garishly vivid aqua background typical of those in photographers' studios.

"What can these parents be advertising?" A broad smile lit up

her face. "See our daughter, the beauty queen? That must be it. Brigadoon High's homecoming queen."

Walt shrugged and switched his attention to the architectural virtues of the house across the street. Gwen guessed that something about the picture made him uneasy. It was almost too life-like, too in-your-face.

They drew even with the big portrait. The face that beamed at Gwen appeared to be about eighteen. A mature eighteen year old. Blond hair fell to her shoulders, fanning out, as Gwen's hair did when she let it grow a bit too long. In fact, there was a disquieting resemblance to Gwen herself, except that the girl's smile was on the naive end of the spectrum, while Gwen's leaned toward the skeptical, bemused end. To complement her innocent, open smile, the girl wore a lacy white blouse, snugged at the neck with a bow.

Her modest dress surprised Gwen. These days, high school girls' outfits tended to copy the tube-top, bra strap-revealing knits that prostitutes on TV crime shows bopped around in. Below the picture were large black block letters: ANASTASIA WYNN CREEL. A second line of sky blue print, harder to read from Gwen's spot on the street, ran beneath the girl's name.

Gwen drew closer. Bending at the waist, chin jutting out, she walked up the driveway onto the lawn, and read the fancy sky-blue script: OUR DAUGHTER IS IN HEAVEN.

Gwen sucked in her breath. She pulled back, shoulders hiked.

Not homecoming queen. A dead girl. Advertising their dead daughter.

She stepped off the lawn feeling she'd trespassed on private grief; but then the portrait sign had lured her, an unwary passerby.

Eyes wide, she neared Walt. "Over there." Her voice was the bait. She slid her eyes sideways as if not wanting to be seen taking interest. "Quick. Read the fine print."

Walt ambled over. Once the words registered, he stepped back nimbly, as if evading a cobra's strike.

In silence they walked past another house, Piccolo straining at the leash to own the middle of the street.

"Isn't that the weirdest thing you ever saw?" Gwen said at last.

Walt's cheekbones looked extra white. "Can't say I've ever seen that before. No."

"Imagine." Gwen was a ventriloquist, lips barely moving. "Who would put up a sign like that? Why?"

No answer came from Walt. He seemed embarrassed.

Gwen was aware of a silly smile on her own face, impossible to wipe off. "Wild. Advertising their daughter in heaven. That trumps all the stellar achievements of every other kid around here." She

laughed. "Still, these other ambitious parents might ask, but what's she *doing* in heaven? Cheerleading, playing soccer, the trumpet?"

"Do we have to talk about this?"

Gwen's shoulders dropped. Walt was only willing to talk about cheerful subjects or how-to stuff. So much else was distasteful. Gwen was always having to remind herself of this. But on the subject of death, she felt she needn't be timid. Not these days. Her favorite cousin had died only three months ago. They'd been close friends.

Painful as his death was to her, she hadn't banished his name from the here and now; she mentioned him whenever he came to mind. But though Walt had liked Steve, he clearly didn't want to hear his name, as if talk of the dead might put the kibosh on his nicely structured day, make the sky a bit less blue, the cumulus clouds a tad less puffy.

"I wish Steve were here." She gazed up at the placid blue sky. "He'd really get a bang out of this."

"The parents must be in a lot of pain," said Walt in sepulchral tones. "You might understand that."

"Of course," Gwen said, and clamped her lips shut. She had been effectively censored. But on the inside she was saying, Pain! Of course they were in pain. After Steve died, she was in pain too, but she'd never think to erect a shrine to him on the front lawn. Sometimes, especially in the last year, the atmosphere around Walt was stultifying. She wished she had the freedom to make a joke without earning his disapproval, even if the joke were a little bit in bad taste. Instead, Walt had to jump to the conclusion that she was laughing at these people's sorrow.

She walked on, tried to imagine being the girl's mother, passing that sign every day as she pulled into her driveway, the same static face smiling the same fixed smile, the constant reminder.

"Probably a car accident," Gwen said.

"What?" Walt looked confused. Gwen knew he wasn't. He was pretending not to grasp her reference, to point out that he'd already passed on to cheerier subjects of thought.

"A car accident," Gwen repeated. "She's so young. At that age, usually it's a car accident."

"Whatever."

Dismissive. Someone erects a huge glass-paned portrait trumpeting their daughter's death and resurrection, and Walt didn't even wonder about how she died or who would advertise such a thing. If she were walking with her friend Jenny now, back in New Orleans, they would be dissecting this curiosity.

What were the parents like? The mother especially. This display was probably her idea. Gwen pictured a plump, hyper-religious woman, literal minded, histrionic; the husband a hulking, stolid type, quietly going along with his wife's mania, knocking the sign's legs into the ground with a mallet, but secretly pained to have to drive past his daughter's face every day on his way to and from work.

Gwen and Walt continued with Piccolo. Three houses down, they came upon two little girls, about nine or ten years old, manning a sidewalk refreshment stand. Gatorade, not lemonade, was for sale, along with bags of M&M's.

"Thirsty?" one of the girls called out. "We got what you need."

"We sure are thirsty." Walt seemed grateful to break the strained mood. "But I haven't got my wallet."

"We trust you," said the blond-haired girl. "And if you buy two drinks, your dog gets one free!"

"She only drinks water," said Gwen as she caught sight of the prices on the stand's sign.

"Seven bucks for two Gatorades and a bag of M&M's! Movie theater prices," she said once they were out of earshot. "Doesn't matter if they're off the beaten path. One sale makes their day."

"It's for a good cause," said Walt.

Gwen wanted to say, When you go back to pay, Walt, be sure to get a receipt; but she kept her mouth shut. In the last year, he'd become obsessive about saving receipts. For Christmas one of his gifts to her was a plastic box with many compartments. He explained that she was to keep all receipts and store them in the box—grocery slips in one compartment, gas in another. There were more than ten categories. Whenever he found a stray receipt, he called it to her attention with a most disappointed look on his face.

Sipping their drinks, they circled one more cul-de-sac, then strolled through a thickly wooded park past bright purple safety-tested playground equipment, until they finally reached the cul-de-sac that was their own.

The very idea of a cul-de-sac had formerly struck Gwen as connoting wealth and leisure; but these days, the tight, house-encircled curve presented itself as a metaphor for that more ominous street description: dead end.

As they crossed the threshold, Gwen felt she was entering a tomb, even if it was a beautiful, comfortable tomb. She'd never lived in such a well-appointed house. Soaring ceilings in the foyer and living room. Oak floors, granite counters, luscious views of the pool from nearly every room. Water poured down the steps of a rock waterfall into a pool that glistened like aqua-mint jelly, the

background planted with palmettos and other verdant shrubs she hadn't had time to identify. Plants that took care of themselves. A postcard from Hawaii it was.

Now that Walt had been transferred and promoted, his pay had jumped nearly by half. Gwen had had to give up her job at the college. Her salary wasn't needed anyway, Walt said. Did she really miss grading English themes? She could focus on her real interests, her poetry, her ambition to write a play. They could start a family. This planned community was designed with children in mind. Great schools, crime statistics barely recordable.

So how could she account for her feeling of being trapped, sealed in a tomb? The answer that popped into her mind was a quote, a deft, five-word sentence from Nabokov's *Pale Fire*: "We are most artistically caged."

The Russian writer had been the subject of her master's thesis some years back, and now that line seemed to pack more meaning than when she'd first read it.

We are most artistically caged; the words romped in her head all the rest of the day. Nabokov meant that to be true of living in this world in general, but it seemed most particularly true of Brigadoon.

That evening as she bathed in her streamlined tub, its massage jets going ninety to nothing, she tried to gauge how much of her caged-up feeling was Walt's fault. He hadn't been controlling in their first years together. Maybe she was overreacting, but lately she'd come to view him as her personal censor. Perhaps the change could be blamed on the move, this totally unlooked for, unwanted transfer to the Dallas-Ft. Worth area.

Area. They no longer lived in a real town, or city, but in a homogenous area full of Stepford wives and transient, ethically-challenged CEOs.

Walt hadn't wanted to move either, but now that they had, he'd taken to their new environment like a unicorn to an enchanted forest. He loved the woodsy atmosphere, the well-run aspect of the planned community of forty thousand souls. He loved the rules, even appeared to worry they might not be enforced as strictly as the real estate literature promised.

He couldn't enter into Gwen's bemused riffs on the insulated, out-of-this-world flavor of the place any more than he could show interest in who'd erected the crazy sign on Rosethorne Place to the memory of a sainted daughter.

Whatever had caused the change in him, she was beginning to view him as her nemesis. Basically kind and loving, but a jailer all the same.

Gwen suddenly stood up in the tub, water streaming down her body. The room seemed drained of oxygen. She gasped for air, reached for a towel, and wrapped it around her. Is this how a panic attack feels? she wondered. No, she couldn't stay in Brigadoon another minute. She would tell Walt. This was urgent. They would have to separate, for her sanity's sake.

But when she rushed into the bedroom, the towel still wrapped around her body, and saw Walt propped up in bed reading his fishing magazine, her courage failed her.

"You're dripping," he said, registering faint surprise. "You're all wet."

She opened a drawer, hunted for her nightgown, then spied an errant Office Depot receipt she'd left on her bureau. Hand trembling, she whisked it into the drawer, grateful Walt hadn't seen.

But you will have to say something, do something, she told herself later, once the lights were out. Or, maybe not, she faltered. Maybe this suffocating feeling had nothing to do with Walt. It was all in her head. His need to keep track of every expense even though he didn't itemize his income tax, might simply be a neurosis he'd inherited from his parents. She was taking everything too seriously.

Still, the fact that she found it nearly impossible to discuss such subjects with him was not imagined. As Gwen drifted off to sleep, the face of the dead girl floated with her. Gwen regarded the guileless smile with envy. "You will never save receipts," she heard herself tell the girl in a half dream.

The next day, when Walt returned from work, he announced that the company was sending him to Nigeria for two months. The news was sudden, his departure imminent. There were shots to suffer, a visa to secure, mosquito-repelling long-sleeved shirts to buy. A scant week later, Walt was gone.

She felt as if a stone had been rolled away from her tomb. Gwen was free, even of Brigadoon if she so desired. She told her mother she might come home for a month with Piccolo. After paying bills, hiring a pool company, stopping the paper, holding the mail, she would head to New Orleans.

A week after Walt left, though, Gwen still hadn't budged. An unaccountable inertia filled her. She felt that she was becoming enchanted by Brigadoon herself, or maybe only bewitched by her few responsibilities. Odd, going to the grocery and knowing that never in a million years would she see a familiar face; but anonymity had its advantages. It was exhilarating to know that she need meet no expectations other than Piccolo's voracious demand to be fed each evening.

Every morning, she walked her dog to the park at the center of their neighborhood, then up and down the eight streets that radiated from it like the legs of an arthritic spider. Though the house with the strange sign sat on Rosethorne Place, the street farthest from her, Gwen felt her walk wasn't complete unless she passed the smiling girl. Each time she rounded the snaking curve where the picture first rose into view, she experienced a breathless fear that it would not be there. Surely, erecting that memorial had been a temporary gesture—perhaps done once a year on the girl's birthday. It would disappear any day now.

Each time she anticipated its absence, Gwen felt an odd emptiness. The portrait was creepy, but if it were no longer there, she would miss it—even wonder if it had ever been there in the first place.

But the portrait never let her down. As Gwen rounded the curve and climbed the gradual incline, dragging Piccolo behind her, she sensed Anastasia's eyes, trained on her, like the stealthy, wandering eyes in oil portraits painted by the old masters. Tracking Gwen, Anastasia's eyes glided right, then slightly left, then zeroed in on Gwen's final approach head on, her canned smile beaming a scary welcome. A stranger's face, conventionally cheerful, yet eerily familiar because of its resemblance to herself.

At the beginning of the second week of Walt's absence, when Gwen passed the picture she experienced a moment's fear that Anastasia's lips would suddenly move, offer a peppy "Good morning." By the time she drew even with the sign, the idea was so chilling, she looked away, muttered to Piccolo: "I'm too isolated. Talking billboards, yet."

Farther down the street she passed the blond-haired girl who'd hosted the Gatorade stand. The child was bouncing a big red ball in her driveway, a simple act that struck Gwen as sweetly old-fashioned. The girl grinned at her. "Hi!" she said. "Hi," Gwen said back, feeling happy all of a sudden. It was the first word another human being had said to her in many days, outside of a long-distance conversation with her mother and a garbled overseas call from Walt.

I could have a little girl like her, Gwen thought, and the idea filled her with a frightening joy.

Just then she became aware of a speeding car. She gave the leash a last-minute pull as the car whizzed by. Dopey Piccolo trotted on, unhurt, oblivious to the danger.

With a pang, Gwen realized she'd let the leash go slack, hadn't paid attention, the very thing she'd warned Walt about. The lead-footed drivers of Brigadoon, cell phones to their ears, didn't seem to care whether they hit a dog or not.

"My mom says people drive absolutely too fast around here," the little girl called out behind her.

Gwen turned on her heel and said, "That's the truth." Again, she felt charmed. She loved the way the girl said "absolutely". But oh, to have a child like that—so much harder than taking care of Piccolo. And if something bad happened to her—she couldn't bear it. Perhaps she shouldn't have children. Walt was right. She would be too protective, and if the worst happened, how could she endure such a loss?

But why was she dwelling on such dark ideas now? She could blame Anastasia Wynn Creel. To think she'd actually feared her lips might move. And since Anastasia resembled Gwen so much, around the eyes, the mouth, it would be like having a deceased twin speak to her. From now on she would steer clear of that morbid sign. She would go to New Orleans, visit her mother. Soon.

But next morning, she walked her usual route; only this time, as she approached Anastasia's house, she spotted a woman standing in the garden near the portrait. She wore a bright yellow sun hat with an upturned bill and white gardening gloves. She was much thinner than the woman Gwen had pictured as Anastasia's mother. A young Hispanic man, shovel slung over his shoulder, stood in the garden with her.

"I want banks of verbena here. They'll set off my Easter lilies once they bloom, and caladiums would be nice, for later in May." The woman's voice was musical, lilting.

Though curious to see this woman who was probably Mrs. Creel, Anastasia's mother, Gwen kept her eyes on the road and clicked her tongue at Piccolo to pick up speed.

"My, what a precious little dog!" the woman sang out. Gwen smiled, thanked her. Mrs. Creel beamed a wide-eyed, slightly loopy grin. "What breed is that?" She stepped forward in the bed, the big portrait even with her shoulder.

Gwen paused, uneasy, sensing Anastasia's presence, a third person mediating this exchange. She scrutinized Piccolo, drawing a blank, then answered, "A miniature long-haired dachshund," as if she were a quiz show player coming up with the correct answer just before the bell.

"Now, isn't she the cutest thing!" Mrs. Creel gave a fluttery wave. Working her legs faster, Gwen sensed the woman's eyes on her back as she and Piccolo wound their way up Rosethorne Place.

Older than Gwen had imagined—late sixties—but she wore her age well as most slender women did. More upbeat, cultivated-seeming. Her gardening outfit—yellow hat, striped clam digger pants, red clogs—was perfect. But her eyes were too wired,

reminded Gwen of Carol Channing in a ditsy role. She wouldn't be surprised if she launched into a giddy rendition of "Hello, Dolly!"

Later that day, Gwen called her mother and said, "No, I'm not sure when I'll come. There's so much to do right here."

Gwen shopped for curtains for an upstairs guest room. She fiddled with an old poem, reread notes she'd made for a play over a year ago. And she walked Piccolo, invariably passing Anastasia's garden shrine.

The need to pass the smiling girl was a compulsion, Gwen knew. Perhaps it was a reasonable thing to get on friendly terms with Anastasia, the symbol of youthful tragedy who looked so much like herself. She was also aware of wanting to see Mrs. Creel again. This woman had been forced to deal with losing her daughter, and apparently had, if in an outlandish way. Whatever the big portrait meant to her, it must have helped, because she could still look after her garden, still notice a cute dog and call out a cheerful compliment.

The very next day Gwen saw Mrs. Creel backing out of her driveway. Gwen was surprised to see the woman in a sporty yellow convertible, top down. She would have guessed Anastasia's mom owned a more serious vehicle, a Lincoln Town Car or some other expensive boat.

Passing Gwen, the convertible slowed: "You're walking that sweet little pooch again," the woman called. "I like to see you walking down my street." Gwen nodded and waved. The words lifted her spirits.

On Thursday, Mrs. Creel was kneeling in her garden again. "Hello dear," she said.

"Great weather," Gwen answered. "I love your flowers." She added this despite the awkwardness of Anastasia's portrait standing between them.

The woman stood. "Did you notice, farther down?" She motioned down the street. "They're at it again, those boys. Hoodlums. Spoiled brats."

"Oh no. What exactly?"

"They're trenching again. It's that time of year."

Gwen had never heard the term before. She pulled Piccolo closer to the curb to hear the woman's explanation. The rich, spoiled boys in the area liked to get in their cars at night and run over people's lawns, especially after a rain when the ground was soft. They called it trenching, and the practice left deep ruts in many a manicured lawn. "They hit the Crosbys and the Bledsoes last night."

"How awful," said Gwen. "Hope they don't hurt mine."

"They've never struck here," said Mrs. Creel. "I'm saved by the

way my garden juts out, the river rock border. They don't want to hit stones and wreck their chassis. I'm so glad my daughter never went joyriding with those types."

Gwen didn't know how to answer that. "Nice seeing you," she said, backing up. "Such vibrant flowers, lovely garden."

"I hope you pass by again soon," the woman said. "Such lovely hair." Then, standing on her toes amid the verbena, she waved at someone down the street. "Hello, Princess!"

Gwen saw the blond-haired girl standing in a driveway one house down, across the street. Her friend was on her knees drawing hopscotch blocks on the pavement. At Mrs. Creel's hello the blond girl folded her arms and turned away. The woman didn't seem to notice the rebuff. She simply bent over and pulled up a dandelion.

When Gwen passed by moments later, the girl said, "You talked to Mrs. Creel. My mom says her husband flew the coop."

Gwen giggled, startled by the expression. "She waved at you, I noticed. Why didn't you wave back?"

"My mom said not to talk to Mrs. Creel. I used to, but she said not to. Her daughter died, you know."

Gwen nodded, thinking, what was this? Was the girl's mother not wanting to associate with Mrs. Creel just because her daughter died, as if death might be catching?

"She fell," the girl continued, unprompted.

"Yeah." The youngster with the chalk seconded her friend. "Out of her window."

How odd, Gwen thought, not really believing their version of Anastasia's end. She remembered how such dreadful subjects fascinated her and her own friends at that age, how they embroidered gruesome details into the story of a child who'd died of meningitis in a house on the corner.

"That's sad," said Gwen. "Mrs. Creel must be lonesome. You might just say hello some time."

"Mom said she's weird, and she takes too much interest."

"Whatever," said Gwen. "You girls have fun playing hopscotch." She moved on. Hopscotches weren't drawn the same anymore. She and her friends used to insert cross-hatched sections they called poison in the top, number ten, bubble. If you stepped on one of those, you were out.

Mrs. Creel took too much interest, Gwen thought, reaching the park. She kept trying to interpret the comment in financial terms, but it didn't fit. Too bad—the girl being ordered away from Mrs. Creel merely because the woman was a little different. That mindset was typical of perfect, predictable Brigadoon. Everyone

had to be alike. No poison bubbles in hopscotch. The atmosphere was suffocating.

Still, she put off her trip. "Don't worry if I don't call for awhile," she told her mother. "I'm starting on my play. I get so much done with Walt gone."

Walt stopped calling because of problems getting a line out from the compound. He managed to send one e-mail, saying he loved her and reminding her to keep all grocery receipts. For that matter, the only people Gwen had occasion to talk to were grocery cashiers. Instead of bemoaning her solitude, she regarded it a rare opportunity to do as she pleased.

But when she read the old notes on her play, her mind wandered to Anastasia Wynn Creel. The play was about a girl of about Anastasia's age who felt her life had already been mapped out by her incurably conventional parents.

Boring. Her notes were boring; so how could the play be otherwise? But now that she'd met Anastasia, if only in the form of a life-sized portrait, her interest in finishing the play picked up. She might benefit from learning more about this tragic girl. There might be something in her story Gwen could use, though she hated to think of herself as a vulture, feeding on another's misfortune to fill out her play. But then, wasn't that what writers did?

She wondered if the girls were right about Anastasia falling from a window. If so, how odd. Maybe it had been one of those long french windows. If it were open, she could have stepped right through. Gwen had heard of people falling out of french windows, but she imagined that only happened to a person who was visiting an unfamiliar house. How could Anastasia not be aware she was on the second floor? Then again, horseplay might be involved, or drugs, alcohol. Maybe she could work the window into the play.

On her walks she scrutinized the windows of the Creel house. Two ordinary dormers overlooked the street. If Anastasia's room were one of these front ones, she'd have difficulty dying from a fall. The roof slanted beneath the dormers at a mild angle like a safety net.

The little she could see of the rear of the house convinced her that Anastasia's room must be back there. The roof abruptly stopped at the top of the second story. She wished she could go into the yard and see.

But what a morbid turn her curiosity was taking! It reminded her of the time she and her friends walked back and forth in front of that little boy's house, talking about how his illness had started with just a little headache. His temperature skyrocketed to two

hundred degrees, her friend Amy said. The nurses packed him in ice! That fascinated them. They regarded the house with intense curiosity, as if they might catch a glimpse of what meningitis looked like, might see a dark form lurking at one of the windows.

The next time Gwen passed Anastasia's portrait, she heard a musical voice call from the front porch. "Hello dear. You with the little weenie dog. Won't you come in and visit? Fresh coffee's brewing."

"Oh." Gwen hesitated, rattled. It was rather warm out. The idea of hot coffee made her face flush.

"Come in where it's cool," said Mrs. Creel.

"Thanks, but I have Piccolo with me." Gwen laughed. "I wouldn't wish her on you."

"I don't mind one bit," said Mrs. Creel. "If she's rambunctious, she can run in my yard. It's safe."

"Yes, then, I guess I will join you. Can't stay long." This was what she had been waiting for, after all. To learn how Anastasia died. So what if her curiosity was not something to be proud of. This was what writers did. Found out all they could about anything that caught their interest.

Gwen felt the cold air from inside pouring out the door even before she reached the porch. She followed Mrs. Creel in, Piccolo's nails skittering on the foyer's white marble floor.

"This is nice." Gwen glanced into the living room at her right while Mrs. Creel turned the key in the front door. A grand piano dominated. On the wall above its open lid was a collage of pictures arranged in the shape of a cross. A fleeting glimpse confirmed that all were baby pictures.

Mrs. Creel led her down the main hall toward the back. In the kitchen, they sat at a round table in a bay window overlooking the yard. Piccolo sniffed the floor, then plopped on the cool tile, resting her chin on Gwen's foot.

"My name is Gwen Hastings, by the way," Gwen said after complimenting Mrs. Creel on the flower beds just outside the window. "We're new here. Moved only this past March. And now, this soon, my husband's been sent overseas on a project, and well, here I am."

"I've made the coffee just as you like it. That wonderful mixture of Gevalia and hazelnut." Mrs. Creel set a bright tangerine-colored mug in front of Gwen.

"Just as I like it?" Gwen giggled, then composed herself. Perhaps Mrs. Creel had a touch of dementia. How much would it cost to humor her for this brief visit? She sipped the coffee.

"Yes, this is very good. I do like it."

They sat in silence. Gwen had expected Mrs. Creel to make some follow-up comment about the fact that she had only recently moved to Brigadoon. "I've never lived anywhere like Brigadoon before," she went on. "A planned community, I mean. Everything is so perfect. It's beautiful really, like paradise."

"Make no mistake." Mrs. Creel raised her brows and nodded knowingly. "There is a worm in the apple."

"Really." Gwen watched the woman's sinewy hands curl around the cup rather than hold it by the handle. Her hands looked much stronger than Gwen would have thought.

"The youngsters in these parts, the boys especially, have no upbringing. They run wild in fancy cars their parents give them without blinking an eye."

Gwen nodded. "I remember what you said about trenching."

"Trenching is the least of it." Mrs. Creel rose. At the kitchen counter, she lifted a large round tin. "Would you like a coconut macaroon?"

Mrs. Creel's long hands clasped the cookie tin to her thin bosom; her clawlike fingers gripped the lid's rolled edge and pried it off easily despite the tight fit. When Gwen had spoken to Mrs. Creel in the garden, the woman had appeared slight of build. Seeing her up close, Gwen was struck by how robust she looked, possibly more fit than she herself at nearly half her age.

Gwen checked the kitchen for more traces of Anastasia, but found none. The home was decorated in a tastefully predictable way. She accepted two cookies on a doily-topped china plate and sipped the coffee, planning her exit.

"No young girl is safe dating those boys. Wait until everyone is more grown up, I always say. You could be killed driving with these wild boys, and they only have one thing on their minds. I ask you, what is a mother's first duty but to keep her daughter safe?"

"Hmm," said Gwen. "If I had a child, I know I would worry."

"How would the little dog like a cookie?" Mrs. Creel bent down, and Piccolo jumped to her feet, eager for a treat.

"No, we don't feed her at the table." Gwen put out a hand, too late.

"Come along, Little Bit," Mrs. Creel said, fingering another cookie and going to the back door. Piccolo followed, pulling the unmoored leash along behind her.

Gwen rose.

Mrs. Creel paused and gave Gwen a pretty-please look. "Let's put Little Bit in the yard a minute. Perfectly safe. I want to show you something upstairs."

"We really need to be going."

Mrs. Creel unhooked Piccolo's leash from her collar, opened the door, and frisbeed the cookie into the yard. Piccolo scampered out in pursuit.

What nerve, Gwen thought. It was definitely time to go, but how to disappoint this woman who was so much in need of human contact? "Well, all right," Gwen said. "But first let me make sure." She stepped outside and immediately saw that a tall brick wall enclosed the entire yard. Piccolo could not possibly get out of this fortress.

Stepping back inside, she said in a humoring way, "Now understand, I only have a few minutes to spare. I have an appointment and . . ."

Mrs. Creel grabbed Gwen's arm above the elbow, guiding her to the main hall and the staircase. Her grip was tight, like the desperate squeeze some old people clamped on you when they were unsteady on their feet; but then Mrs. Creel's balance seemed fine. Gwen hiked her shoulders, pulled away. Mrs. Creel did not appear to take offense.

"This way," she said, and began climbing the stairs.

What the hell, Gwen thought. She would like to catch a glimpse of the girl's room, the fateful window. What was the worst that could happen? Mrs. Creel would rattle on about whatever she wanted to show off, perhaps another portrait of Anastasia.

At the top of the stairs Mrs. Creel turned right, then stopped before a door, opened it, and ushered Gwen inside.

Clearly a girl's bedroom, it was decorated in a fashion even more predictable than the rest of the house. A sampler of the Lord's Prayer hung above the bed, which was covered with a frilly white spread that matched white eyelet curtains. Two cozy country house scenes hung nearby. A long, broad window filled the wall opposite the bed, a desk beneath it. As Gwen had guessed, the room overlooked the back yard, not the street.

"This is very nice," said Gwen, sad to see that Anastasia's room betrayed not a shred of personality.

Mrs. Creel stepped into the connecting bathroom and flushed the toilet. "If you don't flush these once in awhile, the bowl gets dirty," she said, her normally musical voice now sounding raspy.

Behind the woman's back, Gwen rolled her eyes. She edged forward to sneak a look at the bathroom and was amazed to see an incredibly stunning window of stained glass above the toilet. She recalled the fairy tale it depicted: a woman in a tower, letting down her long golden hair through the casement window.

"Beautiful," said Gwen, thinking this must be the treasure Mrs. Creel had wanted her to see.

"That thing?" Mrs. Creel raised her already high-arching brows. Only then did Gwen notice that her eyebrows were hairless, drawn on with a brown pencil. "It is nicely executed, I suppose. Anastasia made it in art class."

"Rapunzel." Gwen gave her voice a romantic lilt. "She was held prisoner in a tower, wasn't she?"

"I wouldn't know. Last year . . . I didn't want to, but afterwards—" Mrs. Creel paused and stared at Rapunzel as if trying to remember how she got there. "Oh yes. Well, something had to be done. The window had to be fixed, you know, so I hired some men to mount Anastasia's stained glass. She'd always begged me to do that. Before, she kept it on the sill beside her desk. The light would come through. She liked that. But why she'd choose such a subject I do not know. Children." Mrs. Creel shook her head as if to say there was no figuring them out.

"Rapunzel let her hair grow long so her lover, the prince, could climb up," Gwen said. "Then he helped her escape."

"An ugly, ugly style. These young girls wear their hair much too long now, like in the seventies. Anastasia's was clear to her waist! I put my foot down. Young ladies should keep their hair short, above the bottom of the earlobe. What a battle! I cut it, cut it right off. Beautiful color. Like yours, the very same." Mrs. Creel held out her hand as if to touch Gwen's hair, but instead slapped her palm to her own cheek and wandered back into the bedroom.

Gwen followed, repelled by the idea of Mrs. Creel chopping off her daughter's hair. "What a nice visit," she forced herself to say, "but now I have to be going."

Mrs. Creel was busy plumping a pillow on the bed. She didn't seem to hear Gwen's exit line. Creepy. Gwen fully grasped the sad fact that this family was dysfunctional to the max. The stained glass Rapunzel, the only original thing in the house, was obviously Anastasia's self-portrait, this room her unreachable tower. The girl had been caged most inartistically, but despite her imprisonment she managed to create a fine work of art.

Though the room was spacious, Gwen felt claustrophobic. "I hate to leave this lovely room," Gwen tried again, "but Piccolo calls."

"It is lovely," said Mrs. Creel. "If this room were mine I'd never leave. I would be that grateful. Now, I want you to sit at your desk. Yes, sit right there, dear."

Gwen frowned. "My desk?" she said. "But—"

"Go on. Just a moment. For me. Sit and look out the window, and ask yourself, can you picture a lovelier room?" Mrs. Creel pulled out the desk chair and coaxed Gwen with a plaintive smile, her eyelids fluttering.

A giddy chirp escaped Gwen's throat as she allowed herself to be guided. A voice inside said run, run, but she sat as directed, on the seat's edge, legs tensed, ready to pop up again. "Yes, lovely. Very—peaceful." Gwen leaned forward. She spotted Piccolo in the yard below, barking at a squirrel. All at once she realized that she was peering through bars.

Burglar bars? No one had burglar bars in Brigadoon. They used alarm systems. Bars were against code. Her spine stiffened. "Oh, that nutty dog of mine," she said. "Listen to her, bothering your neighbors. I've got to get her. She's allergic to bees, you know, and . . ."

"Not to worry. There's no neighbors back there—only a green-space. She sounds like a healthy girl. You sit, enjoy this room." Mrs. Creel backed up to the door as she spoke. "A little later I'll fix your favorite dinner. Don't worry about a thing, honey. We just have to remember, no matter what happened before—words said in anger—we can always start fresh. Every day is the first day of the rest of your life, a new beginning. Why would anyone leave this room, ever, to go riding with some wild boy, misguided friends? How could you go to the prom, a silly dance with this strange boy? Why go with strangers when you have this pretty room?"

Gwen's mouth hung open in a disbelieving, foolish grin as she watched Mrs. Creel back out across the threshold.

"What was that poem I once recited to you?" Mrs. Creel asked, a simpy smile on her face. "'To Persephone, in Hell'? 'My dear, my dear. It's not so dreadful here.' " At that, she firmly closed the door.

Gwen was slow to process the words of the bizarre speech. Next came the unmistakable grind and click of a deadbolt lock sliding into its slot. A tardy flutter of adrenaline jazzed Gwen's heart. As if coming out of a trance fit for a fairy-tale princess, she finally closed her mouth. She rose and pressed her forehead against the windowpane. Piccolo had stopped barking. She was out of view, too close to the house to be seen.

"Don't panic," Gwen said aloud. "Very strange, but don't panic. Think. Let's think."

Her legs felt like soft rubber. She glided to the door, tried the knob. Locked. What she thought had happened, really had. That madwoman had locked her in, and it wasn't just a regular lock you could work with a paper clip. She tapped the door. Solid wood. Odd, the hinges weren't hung on her side.

Gwen looked for a phone, opened drawers, hoping. Nothing but stacks of blank stationery. Not even a TV or computer. Of course not. Who knew what dear Anastasia might see on TV or what corrupting Internet sites she might access, what inappropriate e-mails she might receive from wild boys.

She searched the closet, found nothing of use. Only a message on the wall, written in black ink behind Anastasia's neatly hung jumpers. *Help me, somebody*, it read. *Help me get out of here, God. Somebody.*

Gwen felt even more wobbly on her feet. Stumbling, she lunged for the desk and sat. The lemonade-stand girl said Anastasia had fallen out of a window. Now Gwen believed that was true. Only it couldn't have been this one because just outside the pane she could see corrosion on the screws that held the bars in place. These bars had been there for some time. Gwen pushed her forehead against the glass. It was a significant drop to the ground, a concrete walkway below.

What else had the little girl said? Mrs. Creel took too much interest. Too much interest in the girl, her blond hair. The child's mother had sensed something not quite right about Mrs. Creel's attentions. She'd ordered her daughter away for good reason.

The neat, square room seemed to be closing in. "Thought you were trapped before," Gwen mumbled. "You didn't know what trapped was." Her life with Walt on the outside seemed the essence of freedom. She stared at the bars outside the window. She tried to calm herself, ward off the creeping chill that was taking hold of her heart, the growing terror.

She ran into the bathroom to scout some means of escape. There was no door to the hall, only Anastasia's stained glass window above the toilet. Afternoon sunlight sliced through, pouring the rich reds, yellows, and greens of Rapunzel's robe onto the white tile floor.

"Poor Anastasia," she said. "Buried alive." But what a striking work of art. Rapunzel's face was a serene blank as she lowered her golden hair out the medieval-looking window.

Gazing at the picture, Gwen realized that no shadow of bars showed on the other side. What had the mother said about hiring workers? "Afterwards," she'd said. After Anastasia's death. Of course, the original window had to be replaced. This was the window Anastasia had broken, climbed out of to make her escape. An ordinary bathroom window. Her mother wouldn't let her go out with her friends, kept her from her own prom, but Anastasia had tried to escape anyway. She'd tied sheets together, looped one end around the toilet seat. But the knots hadn't held, or she might have eased through the window clumsily. She fell, broke her neck. Gwen just knew. She could see it now.

This was the only way out for Gwen, too. Anastasia's beautiful work of art would have to be broken. A shame. And there would still be that sheer drop on the other side.

Gwen sat on the edge of the tub to consider other options. She could simply wait until Mrs. Creel brought her dinner, rush past her, knock her for a loop on the way out. Or she could start screaming now, though without neighbors in back, no one would hear. Also, the noise she made would be sure to bring the witch up.

She could be poised at the door, ready to run past her. She remembered the woman's vicelike grip. Surely Gwen could win a physical battle with Mrs. Creel if it came to that. But then, Anastasia never had.

Mrs. Creel said she'd fix her favorite meal and bring it later. Maybe she drugged Anastasia's food, added a narcotic to put her to sleep. She might do the same for Gwen.

Then again, Mrs. Creel might forget dinner—bounce into her yellow convertible and drive to never-never land, forget all about Gwen. Meanwhile, who would know she was missing? Gwen told her mother not to expect a call. Walt wasn't due back for weeks. If he did manage to phone, he wouldn't be surprised if she didn't answer. Even if she were missed, no one would dream she was locked in a young girl's bedroom on Rosethorne Place—Rapunzel Number Two.

The sun brightened, throwing the stained-glass reds like blood onto her clasped hands as she sat on the tub's edge. Her hands were shaking. Red and shaking.

Gwen eyed Rapunzel. She could tie the sheets together, loop one end through the toilet seat as Anastasia had. Tie tight knots. She stood on top of the toilet to gauge how far up she'd have to hoist herself to climb out.

She felt relieved to hear Piccolo barking again. But who knew what that crazy woman might do to her dog.

In the bedroom Gwen found a heavy glass paperweight, a butterfly preserved inside its bubbly core. She stripped the bed, brought the pillow along.

She tied the sheets first, used the white shower curtain too, knotting it around the toilet seat. She jammed the desk chair at a tilt beneath the bedroom doorknob so that Mrs. Creel couldn't enter once the noise of shattering glass brought her up from the belly of the house.

She stood on the toilet seat, paperweight in hand, and prayed Piccolo wasn't right under the window; then she hammered Anastasia's beautiful stained-glass portrait, once, twice, five times. In big chunks, Rapunzel popped out of the thin lead soldering and fell. The initial crash of each large piece was succeeded by a scattershot tinkling of splintered glass—a delicate, even apologetic sound.

Gwen was pleased at how easily the soldering gave way to her punches with the paperweight. She molded Anastasia's pillow over the jagged opening and hoisted herself up, poked her head outside. Below, Piccolo stood well away from the broken glass like a tiny inquisitive statue, more miniature dachshund than she'd ever looked before, emitting chopped, fearful cries like question marks. The ground, a shimmering rainbow of color, looked so far away, Gwen felt she was peering through the wrong end of binoculars.

She closed her eyes against the vertiginous scene and rehearsed what she must do. Turn around, sit on the sill, sheet gripped in her hands. Bow low, scrunching up her body. Get her head out first, then liberate her legs. Move out backwards and scale the wall like a human fly as far as the sheets would allow. Then let go. Flex knees on impact.

Once on the ground, she would have to break out of the brick-walled yard. The only way to freedom might be through the house. If she had to, she would pick up chunks of river stone from the flower bed and hurl them through every pane of glass in Mrs. Creel's beautiful bay window. She would smash her way out to the street. Rapunzel was dead; no prince was coming to the rescue.

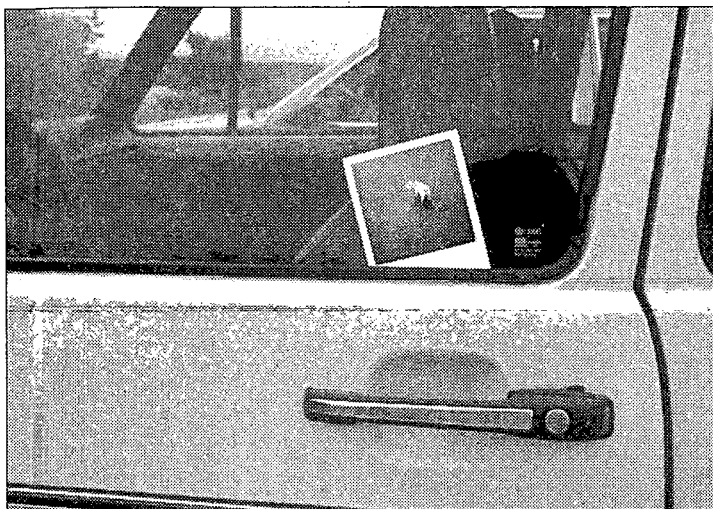
Hands shaking, Gwen risked a last look at Piccolo, so far below. The tiny dog only stared up quietly, like an audience at the circus watching a high-wire act.

The sparkling colors coating the cement walkway made Gwen think of spun sugar on a birthday cake. But a fake cake, like one used in a play. When she got home, she would give more serious thought to the play that was her life. Yes, she was ready to break some windows, crash out of Brigadoon.

Mrs. Creel was pounding on the bedroom door. Gwen could hear her beating the wood with her fist.

"I'm coming," she called down to Piccolo. She turned her back on the yard, gritted her teeth, and tightened her grip on the sheet rope. "I swear," she cried out before pushing off from the sill, "this time Anastasia's going to win." 🐾

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

WHO'S GOING TO HANG?

JOYCE GIBB

Dry eyed, Eldreda gently dropped a spray of a late-blooming red rose down onto the tiny wrapped bundle that lay at the bottom of the small grave. She was beyond tears by now, and when Brother Devyn put his bony arm around her shoulder, she barely felt it. Surely this was all a dream, a very bad dream that would fade away when she awoke. But she was so tired, so very tired.

"Come away now, child." Brother Devyn's soft, high voice came as if through a cloud. "You can help her no more now, and we know she is resting peacefully in God's hand. The brothers will take care of what remains to be done here." He nodded toward the half dozen other white-robed monks who stood quietly by.

One of them reached down and picked up a shovel that was lying behind the mound of dark silty earth at the far edge of the grave. A great shudder ran through Eldreda's body at the finality of the shovel. She buried her face once again in Brother Devyn's thin shoulder and allowed him to turn her away. The two walked slowly out of the far corner of the burial ground, back toward the great abbey church.

Had it been only yesterday that her infant daughter had sunk from fussiness into a sudden burning, dull fever? Frightened because her cool damp cloths and gentle herbs were not stemming the illness's rapid shift, Eldreda had gathered her babe in a blanket and run the short distance across the fens to Barlings where her friend Brother Devyn presided over the infirmary. But even his great skill was not enough to draw the heat from Rosamund's tiny body, and in the dark hour before dawn the life burned out of her. *Rosamund*. That endless moment of waiting for the next rattling breath that never came—it was a memory that would be etched forever onto the stone that was Eldreda's heart.

"Sit down here, my child." Devyn stopped beside a wooden bench near the entrance to the monks' cloister. "We must think what you are to do now."

"I don't want to do anything," she mumbled, as she dropped heavily to the seat, hunched into her grief. Her throat was so tight her voice scarcely sounded like her own.

"I know," he replied, "this is the hardest loss any woman ever knows. And coming when your husband is away . . ." The monk shook his tonsured red head and sighed.

"I don't want to do anything," Eldreda repeated. "Rosamond is gone. I don't know when Merton will return and I can't even let him know that our child is dead." She dropped her face into her hands.

Her husband, who tended the abbey's fishponds, also set eel traps all through the fens' muddy waterways. He had gone off to the port town of St. Botolph to work for a while on the crew of a large fishing boat that plied the North Sea, hoping to earn enough to buy a better small dory for himself. That was shortly after the babe's birth on the day after Lammas, now many weeks ago. She saw in her mind's eye his cheerful wave as he set his shabby cockleboat firmly downstream into the River Witham's sluggish current with powerful oar strokes, surging around a bend and out of sight. Out of sight for how long?

Eldreda drew a shuddering breath. "I've lost too much. I can only think to wait for Merton to come home." She choked back the keening cry that tried to escape through her clenched jaw. She couldn't allow herself to break down. If tears ever started she would drown in them.

Wildly, she thought of drowning in milk. Eldreda's breasts prickled and ached, and stains had leaked onto the front of her tunic. Rosamond had not suckled all the day before she—died? She could not be dead! So short a time ago she had been a warm, squirming bundle, nuzzling her rosebud mouth toward her mother's dark nipple already oozing drops of rich milk in response to the sound of her baby-grunts. *Rosamond. Rosebud mouth.* She tried to draw a deep steadying breath, but it became a gasping hiccup.

"Do you have some dandelion root?" she asked. "I hurt. I need to dry up this milk."

Brother Devyn sighed, fingering the beads in his lap. "You may not want to do that. I have just learned that the woman who was nursing Lady Nicholaa de la Haye's firstborn son has died. Quite strangely, I might add. But the boy hungers, and you ache with milk to spare. God may have opened a path for you both."

Eldreda knew of the Lady Nicholaa, daughter of an old landed family whose roots were already deep in the soil of Lincolnshire long before the Norman conquerors came. It was a de la Haye who had founded this great abbey many years ago in the time of

King Stephen, and she remembered hearing the name recited in prayers here. Barlings owed much to the family.

"But I must stay here, wait for Merton."

"You would not be far. Lady Nicholaa bides now at her manor at Scotstorne, just a few miles from here. When Merton returns he will surely come here, and I can tell him where you are."

"But I don't know where Scotstorne is." She could not think. Her head hurt with the effort.

"I will take you there now, my child, if you are willing to go. Lady Nicholaa has sent for me to inquire about the nursemaid who died yesterday. She fears that there was some foul play, perhaps a poisoning, and she hopes I can tell what befell the poor woman. She is ever loyal to those who serve her, and will not rest until some justice is served."

"Should I go?" Eldreda asked plaintively. "I cannot think what is right."

"Then trust my judgment for now. At the very least you can keep her babe alive until some other arrangement can be made," Devyn said reassuringly. "It will not bring your Rosamund back, but you can give another little one a chance to live."

The fog in her mind lifted a little. She must go. Brother Devyn was right: When Merton came back he would go to the abbey if she were not in their cottage. She could not bear to lose him too.

Eldreda rose from the bench. "There are things I will need from home."

"Lady Nicholaa will send someone to collect them for you. We should be away for Scotstorne at once. Young Richard cries. His blood may be noble but his small belly is as empty as any pauper's."

Nicholaa paced the floor of the hall as young Richard slept in her arms, a small swaddled bundle. Thanks be to Blessed Mary that he—and she—had at least some momentary respite, even though his sleep was one born of exhaustion after hours of ever more anguished crying. She was beset with frustration, anger, and fear.

Fear most of all, for her child. Frustration over this mortal problem of how to feed him, as well as the troubling mystery of Nelda's strange and sudden death. The kitchenmaid had been so smoothly nursing both Richard and her own older babe, a boy already beginning to leave her breast and take bread softened in broth. Nicholaa's jaw tightened. Whoever had made one child motherless and endangered another would hang under her angry justice in her manor court. That was certain.

The babe stirred in her arms and she made an effort to relax. Angry she might be, but it did not help the child for her to be

stirred up. She must keep an air of calm around him.

Where was Brother Devyn? She had sent for him hours ago. God willing, the monk so wise in the ways of healing would be able to discern what had caused a healthy, buxom young woman to sicken suddenly and die within an hour. It could only be a poison. From the how of it surely she could ferret out the who.

Before leaving the night before in response to an urgent summons to Lincoln Castle, Nicholaa's husband, Sheriff Gerard de Camville, had sent men out around the countryside to seek some woman nursing a child who could take over Richard's feeding. There was no time to spare with such a tiny one. The best that had been found so far was a nanny-goat with her kid. Goat's milk was known to be a little easier for an infant than that of a cow, and cook had brought in a fresh cup thinned with water. Nicholaa dripped a bit of it into her son's small mouth now and then, but she knew she dare not give him overmuch or he would sicken. He was still so very young, not yet two weeks old.

She paused in the doorway and looked out. This country manor had only a stout wooden wall to define its yard, no great battlements and bailey such as there were at Lincoln Castle where her family had been hereditary castellans for generations. When her father had died without a son, the office had passed to her, the eldest daughter.

Ah! There coming through the gate were two figures, one in white monk's garb—Brother Devyn at last. She sighed with relief. Now that he was here they could at least begin on a path to justice.

And with him a woman. Whoever she was, if he had brought her she would be welcome. Nicholaa called to a servant to bring bread and cheese and ale to refresh the visitors.

"Lady Nicholaa! I bring you good news!" Brother Devyn hailed her and waved his staff as he approached the stairs leading up to the hall door. A broad smile broke his thin face.

"Come then," she beckoned. "We are sore in need of good news here." As she shifted the swaddled babe to her other arm, he began a mewling wail.

Devyn gestured to the young woman with him to precede him up the stairs. She moved stiffly, looking only downward. Who was she? Not finely dressed, but clean in appearance and sturdy in stature. Strands of pale gold hair, lighter even than Nicholaa's own, escaped from the thick braid down her back, and bespoke their common old Saxon ancestry.

As the two stepped into the cool dimness of the hall, Brother Devyn made a small bow and said, "This is Eldreda, my lady. She

has just this day suffered a bitter tragedy and buried her young babe. Knowing you have lost your wet nurse, I brought her with me. She is willing to feed your Richard, if you wish it."

Relief flooded Nicholaa's heart. She smiled as she had feared she might never do again.

"If I wish it! Of course I wish it, and most of all this young man wishes it! You cannot begin too soon for him!" She drew the younger woman closer and reached out to lift Eldreda's chin, searching deeply into light blue eyes that were icy with pain. She proffered the now screaming bundle, and as Eldreda gathered young Richard into her arms, Nicholaa saw her anguished face soften a little.

"Oh, my lady . . . where should I sit with him?" Eldreda asked, her voice quavering a little as she settled the babe into the crook of her arm and began to loosen the lacings of her tunic. Already his distress was turning to eager snufflings and rootings with the smell of proper milk near.

"Right here." Nicholaa led them to a stool in the corner, tears in her own eyes. "The Blessed Mary be praised that you are here. I am only sorry that you have suffered so terrible a loss."

Brother Devyn stood by the doorway and smiled.

An uglier business awaited them. With the pressing matter of Richard's sustenance settled, Nicholaa had immediately led Brother Devyn out of the hall and around the side of the manor. "Now to what I summoned you for."

She strode purposefully toward a small woodshed beyond the kitchen. Despite the chasm between their stations in life, she had felt an immediate connection with Eldreda that fostered a comforting confidence. No such sense of connection had existed with poor Nelda, now lying shrouded on a trestle in the shed.

"What happened with this woman?" Brother Devyn asked.

"Yesterday she had eaten her dinner with her husband in their own quarters. They have a cottage just without the gate. It was barely an hour later that she groped her way into his workshop behind, complaining of pain in her stomach. Already she could barely stand, and the pain soon grew to agony. He ran to call me, but there was naught to be done for her. Her breath came in quick little gasps, and she was red-hot fevered. She was cruelly thirsty, but nothing could quench her dryness. Wann carried her to the pallet in their house where she soon lost consciousness and died not long after. I can only think that she must have been somehow poisoned, for it all came too quickly to be an illness."

They had reached the door to the shed. Brother Devyn struck a

spark to light the lantern he carried, and Nicholaa led him into the small dark room. The sweetish fetid odor of death was less noticeable than she'd expected. Perhaps the gaps in the thin wattle walls combined with Lincolnshire's eternal east wind from the sea had served a good purpose here:

Brother Devyn held the lantern high as she turned the shroud back from the dead woman's face. Dark curly hair tumbled forth. Peering closely at Nelda's face, he touched the large red blotches on her waxy skin. "Was she so marked before?"

"No, the redness seemed to come with her quick fever."

He bent closer and pulled the heavy cloth further down. "Tell me what else you remember."

"She seemed angry, and perhaps it was distress over her pain, but her words were all confused. I asked her what had happened, but she made no sensible reply." Nicholaa thought for a moment. "When I sponged her temples with a wet cloth to cool her I could feel her heart hammering fast. And after we got her to her bed, she began to twitch, arms and legs flailing. Soon after that she fell senseless, which by then was a blessing."

Brother Devyn sighed. "I think we can step outside to better air now."

"I will send a servant to sew up the shroud."

Nicholaa and Devyn settled themselves in the two chairs at the head of the dining board. With only a small household present there was no need to remove it to clear the hall between meals.

Eldreda approached them, walking softly, with the infant Richard asleep on her shoulder. Nicholaa looked up, deeply thankful for her son's satiated slumber.

"Where shall I lay him, my lady?" Eldreda asked in a whisper. "Betimes he will want more, but for now he cannot hold another drop." Their eyes met and the two shared a smile, even though Eldreda's was tremulous.

"My chamber is there." Nicholaa gestured toward a door at the end of the hall. "You will find a basket for him by my bed." Though Nelda had had the feeding of him, Nicholaa preferred to keep her son close by her.

"Thank you, my lady." Eldreda turned to go.

"Wait, Eldreda. Have you eaten?" Nicholaa noticed that the tray of bread and ale brought by a servant when Devyn and Eldreda had arrived still stood untouched at the end of the table. In the excitement of settling the babe to his overdue meal it had been forgotten. And she and Devyn, so intent upon the mystery of Nelda's death, had not thought of it again.

"No, my lady."

"Well, then, come and take what you want once my son and heir is in his bed."

"Thank you, my lady." Eldreda nodded a small bow, moving off.

"You too, Brother Devyn. You are ever too thin," Nicholaa added.

"I need only a cup to sup," he replied, reaching over to help himself to ale. "Now, as to your nursemaid's death—yes, I agree, she was poisoned. All the signs from your account and what I see on her body point to her having somehow eaten Devil's Cherry. It can act quite quickly."

Nicholaa's heart clutched. She had suspected poison, but to hear her fears confirmed was chilling. Who had done this? "Thanks be to God that Nelda fed Richard just before her poisoning and not after."

"Thanks be, indeed. Some poisons travel through milk. The question is how she got it." He took a deep draft of his ale. "Was there anyone else affected?"

"No," Nicholaa replied, "which is puzzling."

"That makes me think it was intended for her alone," Devyn mused. "Is there ill feeling about her? What of this husband of hers?"

"She was not a cheerful sort, sometimes sharp tongued, but mostly folk put up with her. She and Wann sometimes quarreled violently. He has a quick temper and she tried it sorely. But they always seemed to make up."

"What was their place here in your household?"

"He does odd bits of woodwork and metalwork for us here, turns his hand to all manner of repairs, and tends the kitchen garden. She helped cook in the kitchen."

"So quite ordinary, unremarkable people, no obvious power for someone to be jealous of."

"That's right. Though one can never tell what others will hold dark thoughts about." Nicholaa sat a little straighter and spoke firmly. "No matter that her choleric humors made her nobody's favorite, I will not tolerate the murder of one of my people. There is a child made motherless. We must find who did this and hang them!"

"Of course," Devyn agreed. "And we should start by talking with Wann. I wonder if they did not make up one of their quarrels."

"I will summon him at once." Nicholaa signaled a servant to her.

The lanky, bearded young man stood before his lady, shifting from one foot to the other and nervously turning his cap in his hands. He was all brown—hair, tunic, and sun-darkened skin. His eyes were red rimmed, as if he had been crying.

"I am sorry for the loss of your wife, Wann," Nicholaa began. "Where is your young son now?"

"He's with my sister, my lady. She will see to him while I'm at work." Wann spoke like one entranced, not fully present.

"It is lucky he is provided for. But I have some questions for you. We must know all that Nelda did yesterday before her death. We know that she was poisoned, and we must find out who was responsible for that, no matter who it is." Her voice was low and vibrant with anger.

"Poisoned!" Wann looked stricken. "She was just sick. How would she have been poisoned, I mean, who would do such a thing . . ." His voice trailed off.

"That is what we are here to find out," Nicholaa glared, "and Brother Devyn here has great knowledge of herbs and plants, both those that heal and those that don't. The signs are clear to him that she somehow ate something that killed her. Now, what were her meals yesterday?"

"I think she had a little bread and ale to break her fast. I was out early and didn't see, but that was all there was. Then she was here with you to nurse your babe—but you know that." Wann gulped and stammered. "Then for our dinner she had cooked a pottage with some pease and roots from the garden and a small hare that I . . . found." He shuffled his feet and tried to find a place to put his eyes. He dropped his cap and bent quickly to retrieve it.

"And where did you . . . find . . . this hare?" Nicholaa asked, her voice deceptively soft. Poaching was an eternal problem and could not be overlooked, despite the larger crime that had come to her household.

"It was lying dead by the path near the ruin of an old cottar's hut, on the path that leads to the Stainfield Fen," he stammered. "I was going there to gather reeds to fill in the wattle wall of the shed." His face crumpled. "The very shed where my Nelda is now." The red-rimmed eyes overflowed and he brushed at them with the back of his dirty hand.

"The hare was already dead, you say?"

"Oh yes, my lady. But not long dead, still limp, and quite all right to cook."

His pained eyes looked very earnest. Maybe his story was even true. It would be as well to move past the matter of poaching for now. The man had just lost his wife, however stormy their union had been, and he had a motherless child to cope with. What she could not ignore was Nelda's murder, and Wann's quick temper. Had he wished to be rid of his nagging wife?

"Just so. But we still know not how it was that Nelda alone died. You ate the same as she."

Wann seemed to relax a little, relieved that the subject had turned from his found hare. Did the man not grasp that he might be in a peril far greater than that of being caught poaching? Perhaps not. Most of his wits seemed to reside in his agile hands.

"Well, we ate almost the same, my lady," he said. "All but the rabbit. She dished all of that for herself, and reminded me that she was making milk for two. That was fair. I had enough with the pease and vegetables."

"She ate the whole rabbit?" Devyn asked, his thin red eyebrows arched high.

"Oh, it was a very small one, sir, my lady." He held his fingers little more than a handspan apart. His eyes darted back and forth, and he seemed confused to speak to two at once. "She spoke of how tender it was." His voice broke.

"But how could she have gotten a dose of Devil's Cherry with a meal of rabbit?" Nicholaa wondered. The puzzle was baffling, frustrating, and she must solve it. She felt that they were nearing an answer, but she could not see it. "Brother Devyn, have you any thought about this?"

The monk shook his head slowly. "All the signs of Nelda's death point to Devil's Cherry poisoning, but the source of that is a plant, not a rabbit."

"What of this, Wann? Did she nag you once too often? Did you put a poison in her cup to stop her sharp tongue?" Nicholaa glared and leaned forward into her accusation. In truth, she thought it more likely that if Nelda had driven him to remove her, it would have been a beating in a fit of rage, not a calculated poisoning, but she had to ask and see his response.

"Oh, never, my lady!" He fell to his knees. "I loved her! She was sometimes hard on me, but she loved me too. I know she did!"

"But she is dead." Nicholaa declared. "Someone must hang for it!"

Eldreda sat quietly at the far corner of the table, only half listening to the drama playing at the other end of the room. She had pulled off a small piece of bread and nibbled at it, along with a few crumbs of the pungent yellow cheese. Food did not appeal to her, but the habit of eating to make good milk was strong in her. She sipped a little ale.

Making milk. She didn't know how to feel about young Richard at her breast. If she closed her eyes she could almost imagine that it was her Rosamund there, but when she looked down and saw a downy dark head instead of a red-gold one, tears

rose again in her throat. She was glad the Lady Nicholaa was not there to see when she had almost thrust the boy away. But then he opened his dark eyes and they locked on hers as his tiny mouth sucked and pulled, and she melted, drifting into a place of no pain, no feeling. Brother Devyn must be right. This was what she was to be doing for now. She must provide life for this child, as she could no longer for her own.

The words of Wann's interrogation pierced through the haze she had wrapped closely around herself. Something about his wife being poisoned by eating a rabbit? Memories stirred in her mind, her mother speaking of going to attend a family of chandlers near St. Botolph, all sickened. Yes, it had been about rabbits. She listened more attentively for a moment.

Lady Nicholaa and Brother Devyn both seemed baffled by Wann's story. Should she say something? Lady Nicholaa sounded fierce in her accusations of the man. Perhaps she would not welcome an intrusion. But her eyes had seemed kind when they'd first met, and Eldreda had read her for a fair woman. She rose and took a few steps toward the others.

"By your leave, my lady, I may have an idea," came Eldreda's soft voice. So intent were they on their deliberations that Nicholaa had not noticed her sitting in the corner at the far end of the table.

"You have an idea?" Nicholaa asked, surprised. "What do you know of this matter?"

"Eldreda has a fair store of herb lore too, Lady Nicholaa," Devyn interjected. "She learned much from her mother, a wise woman who lived near St. Botolph. We have long traded seeds and cuttings from her mother's garden."

"Just so. It seems you have gifts beyond your milk." Nicholaa peered at the young woman again. "What say you of this rabbit?"

"I am minded of something that happened when I was a girl in my mother's house, before my marriage. There was a whole family sickened, and they too had eaten a rabbit stew. My mother said that a rabbit can eat of a certain poisonous plant and be not harmed, but that the poison is carried forward in its flesh. None of those folk died, though they were very sick, but perhaps with so many at table none had very much of the rabbit."

"And what is this plant?" Nicholaa asked. Such a strange thing! But perhaps it was the answer. She could not fathom that Wann could have known of this and devised such a complicated plan.

"There we called it Dwayberry," Eldreda replied, "and Brother Devyn has spoken of Devil's Cherry. But I know that plants have different names in different places. I know what it looks like. If I

could see the place where Wann found the rabbit, perhaps I can tell if there is any growing nearby."

"We will go there at once." Nicholaa rose. "Wann, lead us to the spot."

An early autumn breeze stirred the leaves of the great oak tree arching above them. The little party of four stood in its dappled shade by the fallen ruins of a mossy old hut, left long ago by some forgotten cottar. The path to Stainfield Fen ran through low undergrowth a few yards away.

Eldreda pointed to several clumps of dull dark green leaves growing among the tumbled stones. Some were almost waist high. Clusters of shiny black berries hung from the stems. "There it is," she said. "Deadly to anyone who eats of it. My mother said that any part of the plant is poisonous. Stay away from it."

"She is right," confirmed Brother Devyn. "I recognize it, though I know it as Devil's Cherry. I have heard that it can be used in tiny quantities for some fevers, but I would fear to do so because it is so potent. I never knew that its poison could be passed through an animal's flesh, but Eldreda's mother was known for miles around to be very wise in the ways of plants."

"I think the mystery may be solved," Nicholaa nodded. "Show me exactly where you found the rabbit, Wann."

"Just there near the edge of the path, almost where you are standing." Wann pointed, his eyes about to spill over again. "But does this mean that I killed her? I brought the rabbit to her!" His voice rose to a wail.

Nicholaa cocked her head and eyed him. He had in a way been responsible for his wife's death, and in some manor courts he would be summarily hung, even for what was an ignorant mistake. She marveled that he would point out his own culpability. Clearly, he could not think beyond his own pain.

What was she to do with him? There was no sense in orphaning his child. And besides, he was quite useful around the manor. It would be hard to replace him.

"You did not kill her, Wann," she told him, turning to leave. "The hand of God is sometimes mysterious."

Under her foot she felt the wire noose of a poacher's snare. She paused for only the space of half a breath. He was suffering quite enough, she thought. With her toe she quietly pushed the noose farther back into the underbrush and moved on. The poisoner had already been hung. 🐾

MYSTERY CLASSIC

HARVEY O'HIGGINS

THE BLACKMAILERS

I

The want ad—after the manner of want ads—had read simply: "Boy over 14, intelligent, trustworthy, for confidential office work, references. Address B-67 *Evening Express*."

Several scores of boys, who were neither very intelligent nor peculiarly trustworthy, exposed their disqualifications—after the manner of boys—in the written applications that they made. Of these scores, a dozen boys received typewritten requests to call next morning at room 1056, in the Cranmer Building, on Broadway, for a personal interview with "H. M. Archibald." But of the dozen, only one knew what sort of confidential office work might be waiting for him in room 1056.

He was little Barney Cook. And he kept his information to himself.

The directory, on the wall of the building's entrance, did not assign 1056 to any of the names on its list. The elevator boys did not know who occupied 1056. The door of 1056 had nothing on its glass panel but the painted number; and the neighboring doors were equally discreet. The "Babbing Bureau" was the nearest name in the corridor, but its doors were marked "Private. Entrance at 1070."

Nor was there anything in the interior aspect of 1056 to enlighten any of Barney Cook's competitors when they came there to be interviewed. It was an ordinary outer office of the golden-oak variety, with a railing of spindles separating a telephone switchboard and two typewriter desks from two public settles and a brass cuspidor. There were girls at the desks and the switchboard. The boys were on the settles or at the railing. The girls were busy, indifferent, chatty (among themselves) and very much at home. The boys, of course, were quite otherwise. They might have been suspected of having assumed a common expression of inert and anxious stupidity in order that each might conceal from all the others the required intelligence with which he hoped to win the "job."

Barney Cook alone betrayed the workings of a mind. He sat

From The Adventures of Detective Barney, published in 1915.

erect—stretching his neck—at the end of a settle nearest the gate of the railing, watching the door of an inner room and scrutinizing every one who came out of it. He paid no heed to the girls; he knew that they were merely clerks. But when he saw a rough-looking man appear, with a red handkerchief around his neck, he stared excitedly: Surely the bandanna was a disguise! Perhaps the black mustache was false!

Forty-eight hours earlier, in the uniform of a telegraph boy, Barney had been in the public office of the Babbing Detective Bureau; and he had been asked to deliver an envelope to the advertising department of the *Evening Express* as he went back. The envelope was not sealed. It did stick slightly in places—but it was not sealed. And it contained the want ad. “Confidential office work”! For the famous Walter Babbing!

Young Barney had been delivering telegrams to the Babbing Bureau for months, without ever getting past the outer office at 1070, and without so much as suspecting the existence of these operatives’ rooms and inner chambers down the hall. He had seen Babbing only once, when “the great detective” came out with one of his men while Barney was getting his book signed. Babbing stood in the doorway long enough to say: “I’ll meet you at the station: Get the tickets. I’ll send Jim down with my suit-case.” The operative replied: “All right, Chief.” And Barney knew that this was Walter Babbing.

He was a brisk-looking, clean-shaven, little fat man—rather “a dude” to Barney—with a quietly mild expression and vague eyes.

Barney knew nothing of the scientific theory of “protective coloring” in detectives; he did not know that the most successful among them naturally look least like anything that might be expected of their kind. He went out, with his book open in his hand, absorbed in study of the picture of Babbing that had been photographed on his instantaneous young mind.

Subsequently, he decided that he had seen Walter Babbing without any make-up, in the private appearance that he reserved for office use among his men. And he was assisted to this conclusion by his knowledge of the adventures of Nick Carter which he read on the street cars, in the subways, on the benches in the waiting room of the telegraph office, or wherever else he had leisure. And it was the influence of these Nick Carter stories that had brought him now to 1056 in his Sunday best, with his hair brushed and his shoes polished, as guiltily as a truant, having lied to his mother and absented himself from his work in the wild hope of getting employment—confidential and mysterious employment—in the office of the great Babbing.

He was a rather plump and sturdy youth of sixteen, with an innocent brightness of face, brown-eyed, black-haired, not easily abashed and always ready with a smile. It was a dimpled smile, too; and he understood its value. In spite of his boyish ignorance of many things outside his immediate experience—such as famous detectives, for example—he knew his world and his way about in it; he met the events of the day with a practical understanding; and when he did not understand them he disarmed them with a grin. He was confident that he could get this job in the Babbing Bureau, in competition with any of the “boobs” who were waiting to dispute it with him, unless some one among them had a “pull.” Being an experienced New Yorker, it was the fear of the pull that worried him.

He waited alertly on the edge of his settle, watching for an indication that the interviews with “H. M. Archibald” were to begin, and ready to rise and thrust himself forward as the first applicant. For a moment he did not recognize Babbing when the detective entered, from an inner office, in a spring overcoat and light felt hat.

He had a small black satchel in his hand. He spoke to the telephone girl. Barney heard her ask: “The Antwerp?” Babbing added: “Until three o’clock.”

He came towards the gate of the railing, and Barney rose to open it for him. Babbing did not appear to notice him, so Barney preceded him to the door and opened that also. Still Babbing did not heed. “I’ll take your satchel, Mr. Babbing,” Barney said, authoritatively. And Babbing gave it to him in the manner of an absent mind.

The whole proceeding had been a sudden inspiration on Barney’s part, born of a desire to distinguish himself, in Babbing’s eyes, from the other prospective office boys on the settles. Now, with Babbing’s satchel in his hand, he followed the detective into a well-filled elevator, confident of Babbing’s notice; but as they dropped in the cage together, he observed that the detective was looking over his head, occupied with his own thoughts.

Barney got out before him, preceded him to the entrance of the building, and stood at a revolving door for Babbing to go first. Babbing passed him without a glance. A taxi-cab was waiting at the curb, and he crossed the sidewalk to it, with Barney at his heels. While he was speaking in a low tone to the driver, Barney opened the cab door and held it open for him to get in; and he got in, without remark. Barney put the satchel at his feet; but the feet, too, were blind; they did not move. Barney shut the door, reluctantly; and the indifferent auto slowly started up Broadway, intent upon the internal uproar of its own convulsions.

Barney did not understand that if you are a detective, confronted by an incident which you do not understand, you pretend that you

do not see it, so that you may observe it without putting it on its guard. He stood looking after his wasted opportunity, for a regretful moment. Then he turned and ran towards City Hall Park, to get an express train in the subway station at the Bridge.

He knew that the Antwerp—if it was the Hotel Antwerp that was meant—was around the corner from the subway station at 42nd Street.

Barney wanted that "job." Babbing had it, so to speak, in his pocket. And with the shrewd simplicity of youth Barney proposed to follow and put himself in the way until he was asked, impatiently: "Well, boy, what do you want?" Then he would say what he wanted—and probably get it.

Although the subway is not so expensive as a taxi-cab, it is speedier, in the long run; and Barney was standing near the door of the Antwerp—somewhat blown but cheerfully composed—when Babbing's car whirled around the corner and drew up to the sidewalk. Barney opened the cab door and took the satchel briskly, with a smile of recognition which the detective ignored. When the driver had been paid, Babbing turned into the hotel, apparently oblivious of his escort; and Barney followed undiscouraged, with the bag.

"Get away, kid," he said to the bell-boy who offered to carry it. "Er I'll bite your ankle."

Standing back at a respectful distance, he watched the detective get a letter and his room-key at the desk. When he went to the elevator, there was nothing for Barney to do but to go after him. In the elevator, Babbing said "Eighth," and busied himself with his letter, which he read and pondered on. He put it in his pocket and looked Barney over, for the first time, with an abstracted eye. Barney smiled at him, ingratiatingly. The smile met no response.

And still Barney was not discouraged. He was not apprehensive. He was not even nervous. There was nothing forbidding in the mild reserve of the detective's face. He looked like a man of a kindly personality. He seemed easy-going and meditative. And Barney, of course, was not the first to get that impression of him. It was one of the things that explained Babbing's success.

He led the way down the padded carpet of the corridor to his room, and unlocked the door, and threw it open for Barney to enter one of the usual hotel bedrooms of the Antwerp's class, with the usual curly-maple furniture and elaborate curtains and thick carpeting. Barney put the satchel on the table, and waited in the center of stereotyped luxury. "When did Mr. Archibald take you on?" Babbing asked, aside, as he hung up his hat and overcoat.

"He hasn't taken me on—yet," Barney admitted.

Babbing put on a pair of unexpected spectacles and got out a ring

of keys to unlock his bag. Occupied with that, he asked: "How did you know that I was coming here?"

Barney explained that he had overheard the instructions to the telephone girl.

The detective had begun to take, from his satchel, letters, telegrams, typewritten reports, and packages of papers strapped in rubber bands, which he proceeded to sort into little piles on the table, as they came. He appeared to be giving this business his whole attention, but while his hands moved deliberately and his eyes read the notations on the papers, he pursued Barney through an examination that ran: "How did you know who I was?"

"I delivered telegrams to your office an'—"

"For what company?"

"The Western Union."

"Why did you leave them?"

"I wanted to work fer you."

"How did you know we wanted a boy?"

"I saw the ad."

"How did you know it was ours?"

"I—I delivered it to the newspaper."

"Are you in the habit of opening letters that are given you to deliver?"

"No, sir."

"Don't smile so much. You overdo it," Babbing said, without looking up. And his merely professional tone of matter-of-fact advice sobered Barney as suddenly as if he had said: "I understand, of course, that you have found your smile very effective, but it doesn't deceive *me*. You're not so bland a child as you pretend, and I shall not treat you as if you were."

Barney shifted uncomfortably on his feet. The absent-minded ease with which Babbing had plied him with questions and caught up his answers made him fearful for the approach of the moment when the detective should give him a concentrated attention and begin forcibly to ransack him and turn him inside out.

Babbing asked unexpectedly: "How tall are you?"

"About five feet," Barney answered at a guess.

"How much do you weigh?"

"About a hundred—an' twenty-five."

Babbing glanced at him appraisingly, went on with his papers again, and said: "When you don't know a thing, say so. It saves time. What's your name?"

"Barney. Barney Cook."

"Where do you live?"

Barney gave the number of his home in Hudson Street.

"The Greenwich village quarter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Irish-Catholic?"

"Yes, sir."

"What does your father do?"

"He's dead. He was a policeman. He was killed."

"What was his name?"

"Robert E. Cook."

"Robert Emmet?"

"Yes, sir."

"When was he killed? How long ago?"

"About eight years."

Babbing was still at his papers. "Is your mother living?"

"Yes, sir."

"What does *she* do?"

"Looks after me an' my sister."

"What does she do for a living?"

"She rents furnished rooms. Her an' Annie. That's my sister."

"What does she do with your father's pension?"

"She puts it all in the bank."

"What bank?"

"I—I dunno."

"She doesn't own the house?"

"No, sir."

"Who owns it?"

"I—I forget."

"You went to the parochial school?"

"Yes, sir."

Babbing had found a typewritten report for which he had evidently been looking. As he crossed the room to the telephone, he asked: "Do you smoke cigarettes?"

"No, sir."

Babbing took down the receiver from its hook. "When did you quit?"

Barney hesitated guiltily for a moment. Then he answered: "This morning."

"Give me room eight-twenty," Babbing said, into the 'phone. He added, to Barney: "You can't work for me, if you're going to smoke. It will spoil your nerve." And while Barney, dumb with incredulous hope, was still staring at the implication of that warning, Babbing said: "Hello. This is eight-fourteen. Can you get in to see me for a few minutes? . . . Yes. . . . Have you received that uniform yet? . . . Bring it in with you."

He hung up the receiver but kept his hand on it. "Sit down," he

said to Barney. He continued, to the telephone: "Get me one-seven-three-one Desbrosses. . . . Hello. . . . Archibald. Babbing. . . . You have an application there—in answer to our want ad—from a boy named Barney Cook. Have you looked up any of his references? . . . He says he delivered telegrams to us for the Western Union. His father was Robert Emmet Cook, a patrolman, killed about eight years ago. His mother lives in Hudson Street, where she rents furnished rooms. Run it out. 'Phone me right away, about the telegraph company and the police." He turned abruptly, to scrutinize Barney over his spectacles. And Barney, seeing himself engaged if his references proved satisfactory, did not attempt to suppress his triumphant grin.

"Well," Babbing said, "you don't look much like a plant—"

"No, sir," Barney admitted, not knowing in the least what was meant. He rose, at the end of a successful interview.

"Sit down," Babbing said, "your troubles have just begun. Come in!"

II

The last was in response to a knock at the door; and a man entered on the invitation, nonchalantly, with his hat on, carrying what proved to be a suit of black clothes on his arm. He was a large, dark, breezy-looking, informal sort of individual, about thirty-five; and Barney at once misplaced him as a Broadway type of "rounder" and race-track "sport." He ignored Barney and proceeded to drape the clothes over the foot of the bed, as if he had come merely to bring the suit. Barney did not guess that because of *his* presence the man did not speak to Babbing—until Babbing, by a question, indicated that it was all right to talk.

"Any one been to see him to-day?" Babbing asked.

"Not a soul," he answered. "He's been out, this morning, but he didn't connect."

"Snider has picked up some more telegrams." Babbing held out the report to him.

"Got their code yet?"

"No. If we had that, we'd have everything. We can figure out a word here and there. The names are easy. But that's as far as we can get."

They stood together beside the table, their feet in a patch of sunlight, their backs to Barney, interested in a page of the report which Babbing was showing to his operative. " 'Kacaderm,' for instance. That's 'Murdock.' He's one of the men they've been bleeding, out there. They take the consonants 'm-r-d-c-k,' reverse them 'k-c-d-r-m,' and fill in vowels. But they do that only with the proper names. For instance, this last one: 'Thunder command

wind kacaderm.' That can't be solved by reversing consonants."

The operative studied the page. "Search *me*," he said. "Has Acker worked on it?"

"Yes. It was he that puzzled out the names. It's not a cryptogram. They have some simple method of writing one whole word for another. There's no use wasting time on it. We'll have to make our plant to catch him writing a message."

"I see."

Babbing took off his spectacles and began to walk up and down the room, twirling them by the ear bows. The operative sat on the side of the bed, leaning forward, with his hands clasped between his knees. He removed his derby and gazed thoughtfully into it, as if he hoped to find an idea there. It remained empty.

Babbing stopped in front of Barney. "Young man," he said, "I'm going to send you into the next room with a telegram. There's a man in there—registered as Marshall Cooper. Remember the name. You'll give the telegram to him and say 'Any answer?' Watch him. It will be a cipher telegram that will look as if it had been received downstairs. See what he does to make it out. He'll probably want to answer it; and if he does, you may have a chance to see how he makes up the answer. He has a writing table over at this window—here. If he sits down at it, he'll have his back to you. Try to see what he does. Don't try to do it by watching him quietly. He'd notice that. Move around and look at the pictures. Don't try to whistle—or any of that fool sort. Try to act as you would if you were a bell-boy." He had taken the suit of clothes from the foot of the bed. "Go in the bathroom and try these on."

Afterward, when Barney thought of this moment, it seemed to him romantic and exciting beyond all his wildest young adventurous hopes. It seemed to him that he must have jumped to his feet with delight. As a matter of fact, he rose very soberly and took the clothes. His mind was busy with Babbing's directions which he was conning over and repeating to himself, so that he might be sure to make no mistakes. He was troubled about his ability to do what was expected of him. And he went into the bathroom and took off his Sunday twilled serge, and put on the black uniform of an Antwerp bell-boy mechanically, without thinking of himself as engaged in a Nick Carter exploit. Besides, the trousers were too long in the legs, and he had to pull them up until they were uncomfortable.

He heard Babbing answering the telephone, but he did not suspect that the detective was receiving a confirmatory report, from his office, upon Robert Emmet Cook's record at Police Headquarters and Barney Cook's service with the Western Union. Barney was not listening to what was going on around him, nor

thinking of it. His thoughts were in Marshall Cooper's room. He was dramatizing a scene with the gentleman.

The voices of Babbing and his operative conferred together imperturbably:

"How are we going to send him a cipher telegram, Chief, if we don't know his code?"

"I'm going to repeat the one he got last night from Chicago. 'Thunder command wind kacaderm.' He hasn't answered it?"

"Unless by letter. And they wouldn't get that till to-night."

Babbing said: "He'll not go to the telegraph desk asking questions, because he won't care to identify himself to the man there. That's why he goes out to send his messages."

"Suppose he doesn't let the kid into the room at all."

"Well, he opens the door. The boy gives him the telegram and asks 'Any answer?' He reads it and sees it's the same message that he had last night. That'll make him forget the boy. He'll be trying to figure out what has happened. And the boy can stand at the door and watch him. It's worth trying anyway. Go and get the telegram ready, Jim."

"What is it, again?"

" 'Thunder command wind kacaderm.' Unsigned."

" 'Thunder—command—wind—kacaderm.' "

"Have you the envelopes?"

"Yep. Billy has everything in there."

"Don't seal it till I've looked it over."

"All right, Chief."

The operative—whose name was Corcoran—departed with the unbustling celerity of a man accustomed to quick and noiseless movement. Babbing went to the bathroom door. "That's not so bad," he said of Barney's uniform. "Turn around." He settled the coat collar with a tug and a friendly pat. "Wipe off your shoes with a towel. The halls of the Antwerp aren't as dusty as all that." Barney looked up smiling, and found the detective's eyes kindly, amused, encouraging. "I ought to send you out to get a new pair," Babbing said, "but there isn't time. Come in here, now, and let's go over this again. I have an improvement to suggest."

He went to the window and stood looking out. Barney waited in the center of the room, excitedly alert. "You're a bell-boy recently employed here," Babbing said. "The man at the telegraph desk has said to you: 'Take this up to Mr. Cooper, room eight-eighteen, and see that he gets it, this time. It's a repeat.' That's not according to Hoyle, but it will have to do. Cooper won't know any better, anyway. So when you deliver this telegram at Cooper's door, you say: 'I was to be sure that you got this, this time. It's a repeat.' Step inside when you give him the message, so that he can't shut the

door. And then watch him, as I told you before."

He stopped. He eyed Barney skeptically. "You couldn't possibly be as innocent as you look, could you? Because you'll have to do some quick lying, you know, if he suspects anything."

Barney looked sheepish.

"Here," Babbing said, suddenly. He took a letter from the table and gave it to the boy. "Go into the bathroom. No. The door opens in. I'll go in the bathroom, and you can come to the door and deliver this telegram. Let's see how you do it." And he went into the bathroom and shut the door on himself.

Barney turned the letter over in his hands. He frowned a moment at the door. Then he went up to it and rapped. There was no answer. He knocked more loudly. A voice, disconcertingly gruff, asked, "What is it?"

"A telegram, sir," Barney answered.

"Put it under the door."

Barney smiled to himself—the cunning smile of a child in a game. "They said I was to see that you got it, this time. It's a repeat."

The door was opened a few grudging inches. "What's that?"

"They said I was to see that Mr. Cooper got it, this time. It's a repeat."

"Well, I'm Mr. Cooper. Give it here." He put his hand out, still blocking the half-opened door. Barney gave him the letter. The door shut in his face.

Barney blinked at the panels. Then he knocked again sharply. Babbing opened the door.

"Well, what is it?"

"They didn't give me a receipt form," Barney said. "Will you sign the envelope an' give it back to me?"

"Have you a pencil?"

"No, sir," Barney said.

"Well, wait there till I find one."

Barney tried the door slyly. It opened. He edged in, over the threshold. "If you want to send an answer, sir," he said, "I can take it."

Babbing caught him by the "cowlick" that adorned his ingenuous young forehead. "Get out of here," he laughed, "or I'll have you arrested." And Barney, as startled as if he had been wakened from a dream, grinned confusedly. "That's all right," Babbing said. "If you do it as well as that."

"Was I all right?" Barney cried, exulting. "Was I?" He knew that he was; he could see it in Babbing's face; but he wanted to hear it. And he spoke in the voice of a boy playing with a boy.

Babbing changed his expression. "Yes, but this 'Nick Carter' stuff," he said, pointing to Barney's coat on a hook, "you mustn't

destroy your mind with that sort of thing. That must stop with your cigarettes."

It returned Barney instantly to the hypocritical schoolroom manner of a pupil reproved by his teacher. "Yes, sir," he promised.

"Well, we'll see." Babbing was non-committal and unenthusiastic. "You've a lot to learn, yet."

Barney asked, shyly: "What's he been doin'?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Cooper."

Babbing turned back to the bedroom. "That's my business, not yours. You do what you're told—in my office—and don't ask questions. And don't discuss cases. That's another thing to learn. . . . Come in," he called to Corcoran's knock.

The operative came in, taking a telegraph envelope from his pocket. He gave it to Babbing, cheerfully silent. The detective put on his glasses and scrutinized it. He took out the telegram and read it. He compared the "time received" with his watch. "That looks convincing," he said. He moistened a finger tip and delicately wetted the gummed flap. "We can give it a couple of minutes to dry." He handed it to Barney. He went through his pockets for silver. "There are tips you've received. A dollar on account of salary. He may ask you for change. . . . Now don't be over-anxious. If this doesn't work, we'll find some other way. If he gets suspicious and telephones to the desk—or anything of that sort—just get in here as quickly as you can, and we'll protect you. Sit down a minute." He turned to the papers on his table. "Jim," he said, "you remember the disappearance case we had in Dayton—the little girl."

"Yes?"

"Our theory worked out all right. They've got a confession from the suspect and found the body in the bushes where he buried it. Here's Wally's report."

Corcoran took the paper and sat down to read it. "I hope they hang him," he said piously.

Babbing consulted his watch. "Mr. Bell-boy," he said at last, "You have a telegram for Mr. Cooper in eight-eighteen. Go ahead and deliver it."

Barney had a sensation of peculiar heaviness in the knees as he walked stiffly to the door. ("They said I was to see that you got it, this time.") Outside, he paused to close the door with unnecessary gentleness and made sure that the corridor was empty. ("It's a repeat.") Where was 818? He saw 819 across the hall to his left. He put a finger down the back of his neck, and eased his collar. He cleared his throat of nervousness. He walked boldly to 818, raised his small knuckles to a panel, and knocked.

There was no answer. He had put up his hand to knock again, when the door opened and a tall man in slippers and bathrobe asked, "Well?"

"A telegram for Mr. Cooper," Barney said steadily. "They tol' me to see that he got it, this time. It's a repeat."

Cooper stood back. "Come in." His voice was pitched low. "What did you say?"

Barney came across the threshold and Cooper closed the door on him. "It's a repeat," Barney said, "an' they told me to see that you got it, this time." He held out the telegram.

Cooper took it nervously. He was a gaunt-featured, long-nosed, lean man, with deep lines from his nostrils to the corners of his thin lips. There was a little patch of lather drying on one cheek-bone, and Barney understood that he had been shaving. He wiped his hand on his bathrobe before he took the telegram, and he fumbled over it. Barney found himself suddenly cool and confident. He noticed that Cooper's hands were very thin and very hairy; and he looked at them and then slowly looked Cooper over with a curious feeling of contempt. It was the contempt that accounts for half the daring of spies and detectives. People are so easily deceived, so easily outwitted. Their attention is so easily caught with one hand while the other goes unwatched. Barney was learning his trade.

"Why!" Cooper said. "I got this last night."

"Maybe you didn't answer it," Barney suggested. "It's a repeat."

He puzzled over it. "Well," he said, "I—" His voice faded out in the tone of abstraction. He turned and shuffled across the room to his writing desk, his eyes on the telegram. Unconscious of Barney's craning watchfulness, he took a small cloth-bound volume from an upper drawer of the little escritoire and turned the printed pages, comparing the words in the message with words in the book. The code book!

"If you want to send an answer," Barney said boldly, moving down towards him, "I could take it."

He did not reply. He sat down to the desk and took a pencil and wrote, and consulted the book carefully with his pencil point on the page, and came back again to the message, and returned to find another page in the book. "No, that's all right," he said, finally. He tore the telegram and retore it into tiny pieces. "There's no answer." He made as if to throw the torn paper into the waste basket, and then he checked himself. "Wait a minute," he said, rising; and Barney understood that he was to have a tip.

Cooper shuffled off to the bathroom in his slippers.

Barney, as pale as a thief, darted to the secretary and crammed the little code book into his pocket.

When Cooper returned to the room, the bell-boy was standing

near the door looking up at a framed engraving. He took the dime that Cooper gave him, and said stiffly, "Thanks," but without raising his guilty eyes. As he went out, he glanced back and saw that Cooper was returning to the bathroom. Gee!

III

He was so obviously—so breathlessly—excited when he burst in upon the detectives that Corcoran came to his feet at sight of him. "What's the matter?"

Babbing jerked off his spectacles. "What has happened?"

"I go-got it," Barney stammered, tugging at the book that stuck in his pocket.

"Got what?"

"His—his book."

"What!" Corcoran grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and snatched the volume from his hand. He glanced at its brown cloth cover. "What?" he cried. And that second "What" expressed the extreme of incredulous disgust. He held out the book to Babbing who had not moved from his seat at the table. "He's swiped the man's dictionary!"

Babbing looked at it. It was a "pocket Webster," a cheap abridged edition, on cheap paper. "Where did you get this?" he asked; and there was no kindly personality showing in the cold malevolence of his flat eyes.

"On his desk. I—"

"Why did you bring it?"

"Oh, hell!" Corcoran muttered. "This *kid* business!"

"That'll do!" Babbing flared out at him. "I'm in charge of this case."

They glared at each other, as if they were old enemies, with old jealousies concealed and long injustices unforgiven. Corcoran turned with a shrug and sat down on the bed. Babbing rounded on the boy again.

"Why did you bring this?"

"Well, gee," Barney defended himself. "As soon as he got the telegram, he beat it to his desk an' yanked this book out of a drawer, an' began to hunt the words up in it, an'—"

"Wait a minute. Corcoran, get on watch out there. If you hear anything, come back for this boy. Take him in to Cooper and tell him you're the house detective—that you caught the boy with this book and he confessed he'd stolen it from eight-eighteen. Give it back and ask him not to prosecute—because it would hurt the hotel. He won't anyway. And that'll hold him quiet till we can get time to turn around. Otherwise, we've tipped our hand."

Corcoran was already at the door. He went out on the final word.

"Now," Babbing said, with perfect suavity, "take your time. Show me exactly what he did."

"Well, look-a-here!" Barney took the book. "He got this out o' the drawer, an' then he sat down this way, an' got a pencil, an' then he wrote down the telegram—"

"Wrote it down? Where? On what?"

"On a piece o' paper. An' then he looks in the book, this way, an' gets a word. An' then he looks at the telegram. An then he goes back to the book an' turns over the pages. An' then he—"

Babbing reached the dictionary from him. "Wait." He put on his spectacles and wrote on the back of an envelope: "Thunder command wind kacaderm." Below that he wrote it again, reversed, and then several times with the words transposed and permuted in all possible orders. He turned to the word "thunder" in the dictionary. It was at the bottom of the first of the three narrow columns that filled the page. He studied it. He studied the words around it. He turned the page, and his eyes widened thoughtfully on the word "through" at the bottom of the third column. The line read "Through, (throo) *prep.* from." And on the margin the point of a pencil had made a light indentation. He turned back to "Thunder"; and on the margin there, the pencil mark showed in a raised point.

He wrote, under the word "thunder" on his paper, the word "through."

He turned to the word "command" in the dictionary, but after a prolonged scrutiny he wrote nothing.

He turned to "wind." And he found, on the same page but in another column, the word "will" touched with a faint pencil mark. He sat back in this chair and his face became meditatively blank.

His eyelids constricted sharply. He wrote: "Murdock will come through." Turning back to the dictionary to the word "command," he found "come" standing directly beside it in the parallel column of print on the page. He looked at Barney and nodded. "Got it!" he said, grimly. "Go and bring Corcoran."

Barney, almost running—but on his tiptoes—with the secrecy and the excitement, saw himself vindicated to the surprised Corcoran. He saw himself the hero of the occasion. He had solved the mystery! He had discovered the cipher! He signaled imperiously to Corcoran in the hall. The operative came scowling.

When they returned to the room, Babbing said: "Sit down there, boy, and keep quiet. You scuttle like a rat. . . . Jim, I've got his method. I want you to send off some messages while I'm translating these. Wire our Chicago office: 'Case 11A393. Case completed. Immediately arrest Number Two on information in your files.' Wire Indianapolis in the same words to grab Pirie. He's Number Three.

And have Billy 'phone the office to get papers and an officer up here, at once, for our friend next door. I'll hold him till they come. Go ahead. I'll finish this."

He settled down to his task studiously, copying out cipher telegrams, and writing between the lines the translated words as he found them in the dictionary. And in a room that was quiet and sunny, working with a little complacent pucker of the lips occasionally, or raising his eyebrows and adjusting his spectacles in a pause of doubt, he looked anything but sinister, anything but the traditional "bloodhound" on the train in a man-hunt. There was something Pickwickian in his small rotundity. The nattiness of his business suit gave him an air of conventional unimportance.

Barney watched him fascinatedly. His plump little hands—his rather flat profile with its small beaked nose and the owlish spectacles—his dimpled chin—all reminded the boy of some one incongruous whom he could not place. When Babbing took out a white silk handkerchief to polish his glasses and buried his nose in it before he replaced it in his pocket, Barney remembered. It was a bishop who had once graced the closing exercises of the parochial school by conferring the prizes. He had given Barney a "Lives of the Saints."

"Now, young man," Babbing said, "get off that uniform. I'm going in to get a statement from your Mr. Cooper. If any one rings me up, take the number. If any of the men come in here, tell them where I am. I'm registered as A. T. Hume. Wait here till I come back." He had taken a small blue-metal "automatic" from his hip pocket and put it in the side pocket of his coat. He gathered up his notes and the dictionary. "Don't make the mistake again of exceeding your instructions. You've forced our hand, already."

"Yes, sir," Barney said, contritely. But the door had scarcely closed before he was capering. He did a sort of disrobing dance, his face fearfully contorted with grins that were a silent equivalent of whoops of delight. And it was an interpretative dance. It expressed liberation from drudgery and the dull commonplace. It welcomed rhythmically a life of adventure, in which a boy's natural propensity to lie should be not only unchecked but encouraged—that should give him, daily, games to play, hidings to seek, simple elders to hoodwink and masquerades to wear. He danced it, in his shirt sleeves, waving his coat—and in his shirt tails waving coat and trousers. It stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and he darted into the bathroom to be ready in case he should be called upon.

He was clothed and sober—rocking himself to an ecstatic croon in one of the Antwerp's bedroom rockers—when he heard a thudded report in the hall. It sounded to him as if two books had clapped together. He sat listening.

Babbing came in. "Get out of here, boy. What have you done with that uniform? Put it in my valise. Snap it shut. Hurry. Report to the office to-morrow morning at eight-thirty." He was at the telephone. "Give me the house detective," he said. "What? Mr. Dohn, your house detective." He put his hand over the transmitter. "How much have you been earning?"

"Six dollars a week—with the tips."

"You'll start at twelve. Hurry up. Get out of here. To-morrow morning at eight-thirty."

Barney started for the door, reluctantly.

"Hello. Dohn? This is Babbing. Get up here as quick as you can with a doctor. That Chicago swindler in eight-eighteen has shot himself. Through the mouth. He's blown the back of his head out. Hurry up!"

Barney, slamming the door behind him, fled down the hall, frightened, aghast, but with a high exultant inner voice still crooning triumphantly: "I'm a de-tec-tive! I'm a de-tec-tive!" Through the mouth! The back of his head out! Even in his horror there was a pleasurable shudder, for he had all a boy's healthy curiosity about murder, shootings and affairs of bloodshed. "I'm a de-tec-tive!" And he hurried to tell his mother of his new job, aware that she would cry out against it—till he explained: "I start at twelve a week." That would settle it with her. "I'm a detective! I'm a detective!"

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From "By the Monkey-Ladder Vine" AHMM, April 2004

—Anne Weston

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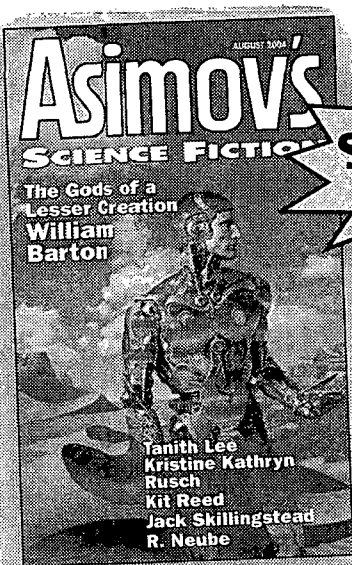
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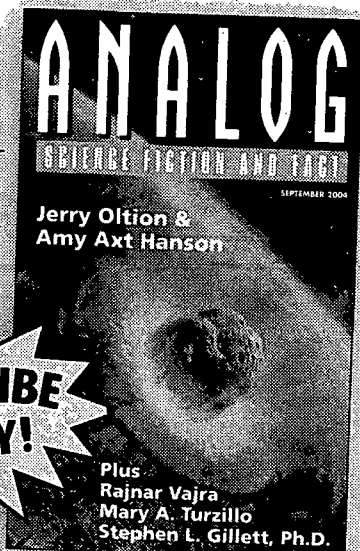
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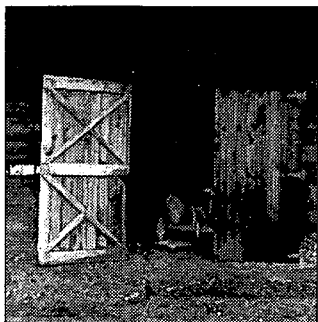
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THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Richard Howard of Conway, Arkansas. Honorable mentions go to Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, Florida; Grant Hurley of St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada; Mark L. Cook of Williamsburg, Ontario, Canada; Bill Raines of Naples, Florida; Todd Riggs of Elkhart, Kansas; Rudy Uribe, Jr. of Van Nuys, California; Ed Lynskey of Annandale, Virginia; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; and C. T. Landry of Destrehan, Louisiana.



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PAYDAY RICHARD HOWARD

The day after spending the last twenty years in prison Marty Rumbach drove down Highway 65 with the radio blaring and a smile on his face. He could have gotten out ten years sooner if he had accepted the deal with the authorities and told them where the money was, all one million dollars of it. He never really considered it; that much money stretches a long way south of the border.

Marty knew the chances of getting caught were likely when he stole the money from the bank. But he was willing to do time in prison if he could hide the money first where no one would find it, and he had. He had buried it about three feet deep under the dirt floor of the wooden barn on the old Henderson place. Now, he was almost giddy with anticipation as he drew closer. The big payday was here and the last twenty years would soon be a distant memory.

He turned off the highway onto what was once a gravel road, but was now paved. Things had sure changed in the last two decades, he thought. Lots of new houses and traffic.

A few miles down the road, Marty suddenly stopped the car after making the last curve before the Henderson farm; or at least where the farm had been. The Hillside Mall now sat on about a hundred acres of farmland, and where the Henderson's barn had once been there was now . . . a bank.

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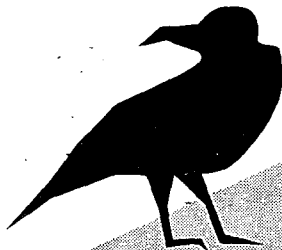
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